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APATHY OR SELF INTEREST? THE VOLUNTEER'S AVOIDANCE OF LEADERSHIP ROLES^{1,2}

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This paper presents exploratory data with the intention of bettering our understanding of the leadership of voluntary organizations. "Organizational leaders" are those holding official positions with the legitimate authority to direct the behaviors of others; these positions hold titles such as executive director, president, treasurer, etc. The leadership function in business and government organizations staffed by employees has been extensively investigated. The effects of leader and follower personality characteristics, characteristics of the environment or situation, and now, contingency theories focusing on the interaction between individual and situational characteristics of the leadership in employing organizations have been painstakingly explored (see Vroom, 1976; Fleishman, 1971 for summaries).

However, there has been little scholarly examination of the leadership function in voluntary associations. Rawls, Ullrich and Nelson (1975) found that managers in profit and nonprofit organizations had different personalities: nonprofit managers were more dominant, flexible, and concerned with personal relations; managers in profit-seeking organizations emphasized economic health, security, and obedience. Gatewood and Lahiff (1977) found that nonprofit sector managers rated the job factors of relationship with co-workers and community involvement higher, and prestige lower than profit sector managers. Together these studies emphasize the differences between nonprofit and profit organization leaders and their jobs. The present study focuses on the differences in desire for, and availability of, leadership positions in all-volunteer and all-employee staffed organizations.

The allocation of authority is a primary characteristic of formal organizations, and certainly, voluntary organizations have committees and positions that have been allocated authority for certain decisions. Voluntary organizations must allocate authority to certain members, and like other formal organizations, they do this through the establishment of "leadership" positions.

The leadership positions in voluntary organizations have been most often examined with a concern about the inactivity or "apathy" of the majority of members of these nominally democratic organizations. The presence of majority inactivity and a relatively permanent leadership oligarchy has been well documented (Michels, 1959; Truman, 1951; Tsouderos, 1955; Rose, 1954; Sills, 1957). These authors investigated "structural antecedents" of apathy, such as increased size, specialized tasks, and the development of a leadership with a vested interest in perpetuating its position. The present study examines the formation of oligarchy in both nominally democratic voluntary organizations and in government and business bureaucracies. The results indicate that there is no need to assume a lack of affect, that is, apathy, in the inactive majority; a more parsimonious explanation is available.

The data on which this examination is based are drawn from a larger study of the organizational structure, social norms, and members' attitudes of all-volunteer social service organizations (see Pearce, 1978). Although that research contained hypothesis-testing and exploratory components, the data used in this report are based on the exploratory work. The data were unexpected and thought-provoking; they are presented here with speculations about their implications with the hope that they might stimulate others' interest in the study of leadership in these groups.

METHOD

For the purpose of the larger study, seven all-volunteer run and staffed organizations were matched with seven all-employee run and staffed organizations that worked on the same, or similar primary task.³ Matching allowed explicit comparisons with previous employing-organizational research and helped to control for the powerful effects of primary task on organizational structures, norms, and attitudes. To aid generalization, fourteen organizations were examined to insure that the data were not too setting-specific. The sample includes two day care centers, two free weekly newspapers, two poverty relief agencies, two symphonic orchestras, two family planning clinics, two gift shops, and two fire departments. Summary indicators of the characteristics of these organizations are included in Table 1.

The data collection procedure followed the same pattern in each organization. Both pairs of a matched set were studied simultaneously to insure that the passage of time would not confound comparisons between voluntary and employing organizations, and to allow daily comparisons of their respective norms and practices. However, since only one researcher was involved in data collection, the matched pairs were studied serially, in the order listed above.

In the larger study, a broad range of data collection techniques were used. Data in the present report are drawn from structured and informal interviews, and observational material. Structured interviews were conducted with a stratified random sample from each organization, with over sampling done among those in leadership positions. "Leaders" were defined as those holding formal elected or appointed offices in the voluntary organizations and as those having direct supervisory responsibilities in the employing organizations. In Table 2 the number of leaders and non-leaders interviewed by organizational type is presented. Observations used here are drawn from the researchers field notes. A more detailed description of sample, data collection procedures, and instruments can be found in Pearce (1978).

RESULTS

There were different attitudes toward the assumption of leadership positions in these voluntary and employing organizations. In the voluntary organizations authority could be obtained merely by seeking it, that is, by pursuing an office. However, leadership roles were not commonly sought by members of these organizations; in fact, many actively avoided them. In contrast, leadership authority in the employing organizations was difficult to obtain

TABLE 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLED ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations	Number of Members	Number of Clients	Percentage 1977 Turnover	Average Age of Members	Number Structured Interviews
Voluntary Day Care	46	25 children	13	27.5	10
Employing Day Care	20	65 children	10	28.2	6
Voluntary Newspaper	30	4,000 circulation	67	25.2	9
Employing Newspaper	13	50,000 circulation	85	25.8	8
Voluntary Poverty Relief	180	13,245 assists	14	44.1	10
Employing Poverty Relief	53	2,300 current caseload	25	44.7	10
Voluntary Orchestra	90	1,000 per concert	8	38.1	10
Employing Orchestra	91	3,000 per concert	2	38.7	7
Voluntary Family Planning	14	200 current caseload	0	34.2	7
Employing Family Planning	21	4,000 current caseload	10	34.8	10
Voluntary Gift Shop	138	288 sq. ft. floor space	4	44.1	9
Employing Gift Shop	8	864 sq. ft. floor space	50	44.6	4
Voluntary Fire Department	160	15,000 town pop.	3	39.4	8
Employing Fire Department	47	26,000 city pop.	0	40.0	9

TABLE 2
INTERVIEWEES BY ORGANIZATIONAL POSITION
AND TYPE

Organizational Position	Organizational Type		n
	Voluntary	Employing	
Leader	35	22	57
Non-Leader	28	32	60
n	63	54	117

and actively sought by the majority. It must be allocated by the employer, or employer's representative. In practice it involved a "promotion" to a leadership role, and the pyramidal nature of these organizations meant that many, no matter how qualified, would never assume leadership positions.

These differences were reflected in members' responses to interview questions. Two structured interview questions were selected. The first was, "How much say would you say you personally had in the way things were done around here?" with responses scored from 1 = no personal influence through 5 = considerable personal influence.⁴ There was no significant difference between these volunteers and employees in actual personal influence (3.14 vs. 3.02, respectively, $F(1,115) = .70, n.s.$). The second question, "How much would you like to have?" was scored from 1 = less influence than I have now, to 4 = much more influence than I have now. Although there was no significant difference between volunteers and employees in their actual personal influence, volunteers desired significantly less organizational influence than did employees (2.13 vs. 2.48, respectively, $F(1,115) = 8.59, p = .004, \eta^2 = .27$); in fact, volunteer leaders stated that they wanted less organizational influence than they currently held. No employees, neither leaders nor non-leaders, expressed that desire.

An examination of what employees and volunteers actually said about leadership in their organizations provides further indication of the polarity of their attitudes. The following paid firefighter's response to the question "Would you like another job in the organization?" is typical:

"Sure, everyone wants to move up, but there's no where for me to go really. There are thirty-six firefighters and only four battalion chief jobs. I would have to wait for one of them to retire or be promoted, and when is that going to be? Five years or more" (structured interview, firefighter, employing fire department).

The employing family planning clinic is another example. Job level was dependent on educational credentials as well as merit. The highest ranking administrative officer holds a master's degree in administration, and the highest ranking clinical officer is a nurse practitioner. Their subordinates could not be promoted to these positions without additional education, yet most would like these jobs.

In contrast, non-office holding volunteers rarely showed an interest in the assumption of positions of leadership. The following two responses, the first from a rank-and-file volunteer and second from a leader, were typical of the responses of other volunteers to the question "How much say would you say you personally had in the way things are done around here?"

"Just a vote. Really, I'm happy with what I have. I've got no time for more responsibility" (structured interview, teacher's assistant, voluntary day care center).
 "Quite a bit, if I want to use it. My judgment is respected by most in the center ... Maybe I have too much; I would like to see other people more involved" (structured interview, treasurer, voluntary day care center).

These themes -- responsibility requires time, and leadership exercised through influence ("respect") rather than power based upon position -- were quite characteristic of the attitudes of volunteers toward leadership of their organizations. The "time" requirements of leadership positions seemed to be a paramount consideration. One poverty relief agency volunteer praised her organization by saying it was one in which members were not "dragged into endless committee-work." The requirement that voluntary leaders contribute more of their "free-time" appears to be a major barrier to greater rank-and-file volunteer interest in pursuing leadership positions and is consistent with the findings of Sills (1957). This finding can be generalized.

DISCUSSION

It will be argued that the primary reason that volunteers tend to avoid leadership positions in their organizations but employees actively pursue comparable positions is that leadership positions in these two types of organizations offer very different rewards. Positions of leadership in employing organizations bring perquisites in addition to the ability to influence policy. Employing leadership jobs are usually characterized by higher salary, more autonomy, less tedious work, more clerical assistance, and more status symbols such as a private office. In voluntary organizations, those holding leadership positions receive none of these perquisites. Usually, their tasks are even more tedious (more meetings and less direct contact with clients) and more time consuming (leaders are responsible for certain tasks and must do these tasks themselves if no one else can be found to help). For example, the treasurer may have to type the annual financial report or the president may spend a day in the office answering the phone if no volunteer can be found to do this work. In short, in voluntary organizations leadership brings more labor, no more real autonomy than any volunteer has, and little of the reward and coercive power (French and Raven, 1959) available to most employee leaders. There is little need to refer to such psychological constructs as "membership apathy." When volunteers have little to gain and much to lose by assuming active leadership roles in their organizations, it certainly is in many members' self-interest to maintain a rank-and-file role. We need only state that for those who do assume leadership roles the benefits, such as greater influence in the organization's direction, instrumental personal contracts and the like, outweigh the substantial costs. With evidence of these salient environmental pressures, reliance on attitude or affect explanations is simply unnecessary. Researchers such as Barber (1965) and Sills (1957) also develop structural explanations for inactivity, but they retain the term "apathy" in their discussions, a term which indicates an emotional state in the volunteer. In this sample, there was no evidence that inactivity derived from lack of feeling, only that becoming an active member was too costly to most volunteers.

Before these conclusions can be generalized, it is important to note a limitation of the present sample. Previous research on member apathy was conducted in large organizations, while these voluntary organizations are quite small (see Table 1). There are two reasons why apathy, itself, may be less likely in smaller organizations. First, psychologists argue that more tension (or emotion) is evident in smaller groups (Bales, 1950).

Second, in larger organizations the routes to leadership positions are probably longer and, hence, appear more difficult. Volunteers in larger organizations may psychologically withdraw in the face of this more difficult task. Therefore, it is quite plausible that the sampled organizations were simply too small for apathy to develop. However, they were not too small for the majority of members to avoid active participation. Majority inactivity and the avoidance of leadership positions characterized these organizations as well. Perhaps membership apathy is caused by a large organizational membership, but does not lead to the avoidance of leadership positions. It is a fact that these positions entail few rewards and greater commitment of personal resources that leads to avoidance of leadership in most nominally democratic organizations, regardless of their size. It seems that apathy is epiphenomenal to broad membership inactivity and not the cause of it.

One interesting result of this difference in the perquisites received by leaders in voluntary and employing organizations is that members tend to attribute different "motives" to their leaders. Volunteers, although they may disagree with their leaders or not care for them personally, are always quick to praise the leaders' selflessness and commitment to the organization. Voluntary leaders are respected because they are seen as "giving" a great deal to the organization and its mission. This is an interesting in situ demonstration of Staw's (1976) contention that attributions of intrinsic motivation are made in the absence of apparent extrinsic inducements for the activity.

In contrast, employees were never found to attribute altruism to their leaders. Employees often respected their leaders' knowledge, liked them personally, feared or resented them, but they did not praise their selfless dedication. Volunteer leaders are viewed as giving more than they receive, whereas employee leaders are seen as receiving, if not more than they give, at least enough to amply reward them for their work.

Based on these findings, it is almost as if volunteers "reward" their leaders with the ability to influence policy in return for taking on the burden of the leadership role. Someone must be responsible for directing and coordinating members' activities, and one reward for this duty is the ability to have greater personal influence on the organization's direction and priorities.

IMPLICATIONS

Here, brief speculations about the theoretical and practical implications of these ideas are offered. The present data indicate that positions of leadership in formal organizations are not necessarily sought for the influence they provide for their occupants; the perquisites and negative consequences of this increased authority affect their desirability as well. Most analyses of leadership have focused on employee leaders, and perhaps because of this, researchers seem to have assumed that leadership positions are desirable because of the opportunity to influence the behavior of others. Some have posited a "need" for power that leads individuals to seek leadership positions (see McClelland, 1975; and Zaleznik & Kets de Vries, 1975). The present data seem to indicate that this desire to have influence over others as an end in itself does not generalize to voluntary organizations. Much more likely is the contention that situational factors are more useful than measures of

power motivation in predicting individuals' attempts to gain influence. These results indicate that presupposing a need for power may not be as useful as examining the rewards and costs of holding a leadership position in order to understand organizational members' desire to assume these roles.

This negative attitude toward leadership positions in voluntary organizations could be expected to affect the quality of their leadership. If few members can be found to fill positions, the membership may have to accept those willing, but perhaps not most qualified, to assume the responsibilities. Alternatively, the time requirements of these positions provide a face-saving option for those who have not performed their leadership functions well. Claiming other demands on their time, they may relinquish their positions for a rank-and-file membership role.

Yet if the voluntary organizations are to remain viable, they must find ways to increase the attractiveness of their leadership positions. Based on Lipset, Trow and Coleman's (1962) contention that too great a discrepancy in the perquisites of union leaders and members makes it more difficult for leaders to relinquish their positions, I would argue against increasing the "benefits" for office holding. Instead, progress can be made in reducing the added "costs" of leadership positions. Open-ended demands on leaders' time could be prevented with explicit job descriptions. Some of the tasks associated with these jobs could be delegated (e.g., one person who receives the mail and forwards it to the relevant officers could save hours of a president's time). Too often in these sampled voluntary organizations greater participation was "rewarded" with more work so that the better members were often forced to quit in order to avoid being buried in assignments.

In conclusion, evidence from a larger study of matched employing and voluntary organizations indicates that volunteers are much less likely than employees to pursue positions of leadership in their organizations. It was argued that this could be better understood as the result of the differences in the benefits and costs of holding leadership positions in these two types of organizations rather than reference to affective states such as apathy. While employee leaders receive many perquisites in addition to the ability to influence organizational policy, volunteers receive few or none of these and must normally expend even greater amounts of their free time in the service of the organization's goals. This phenomenon has both theoretical implications for the study of organizational behavior and practical implications for the functioning of voluntary organizations.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Special Session on Voluntary Groups in Modern Society at the Ninth World Congress of Sociology, Uppsala, Sweden, 1978.

2. Supported in part by the Organizational Effectiveness Research Program, Office of Naval Research, under contract N00014-75-C-0269, NR 17-744 to Yale University, J. Richard Hackman, principal investigator.

3. In this study, a voluntary organization is one in which members are not paid for their labor. An employing organization is one in which members are paid for their labor. Although the distinction seems straightforward, there were complexities. For example, some organizations reimburse their members for training expenses or for travel to and from the organization. Such organizations are still considered to be voluntary organizations because reimbursements are not compensation for work performed.

4. Estimates of inter-rater agreement for these two structured interview scales are available. For both of these two scales, there was 100% agreement between the researcher and the hypothesis-blind rater. More complete information about measures used in this study is available in Pearce (1978).

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