Predicting Future Volunteering Intentions through a Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Using Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan 1985), we conducted a cross-sectional survey to test the relationship among competence, intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and intention to continue volunteering. A total of 180 Special Olympics volunteers from China participated in this study. The results showed that competence positively predicted intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction. Intrinsic motivation was a partial mediator for the relationship between competence and job satisfaction. Job satisfaction positively influenced intention and it acted as a full mediator in the relationship between intrinsic motivation and intention. It was concluded that SDT is a useful theoretical framework in understanding intention to continue volunteering. Theoretical and practical implications are provided.

Keywords competence, volunteer motivation, satisfaction, intention
Predicting Future Volunteering Intentions through a Self-Determination Theory

Perspective

Volunteering is defined as “any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or cause” (Wilson 2000, p. 215). It benefits both the organization as well as the volunteer. Voluntary activities or labor force provided by volunteers add significantly to governmental and non-governmental organizations. Volunteers gain knowledge, increase social networks, and enhance career prospects through their volunteer activities (Brooks et al. 2014; Hall et al. 2004; Ridge and Montoya 2013). Despite the importance and benefits of volunteering, retention of volunteers has been a challenge for organizations (Bidee et al. 2013; Netting et al. 2005). As such, it is important to understand the mechanisms underlying volunteerism and increasing volunteers’ intention to continue volunteering. Motivation has been identified as a critical factor for predicting retention of volunteers (Bidee et al. 2013; Ghose and Kassam 2014; Lai et al. 2013; MacLean and Hamm 2007; Wang and Wu 2014). The aim of the present study was therefore to examine volunteers’ continuing intention via the lens of a motivational theory – Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan 1985, 2000).

Self-Determination Theory

SDT is a broad framework that has been widely applied in the study of human motivation (Deci and Ryan 2000). SDT consists of five mini-theories and two (Organismic Integration Theory, OIT and Basic Psychological Needs Theory, BPNT) will be discussed in detail given the scope of the current study. According to OIT, volunteering is a planned behavior that can either be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. Intrinsic motivation is defined as doing an activity for its own sake (e.g., participating in a voluntary activity for the pleasure of the activity itself). By contrast, extrinsic motivation refers to participating in an activity for its instrumental outcomes (e.g., participating in a voluntary activity for contingent
rewards; Deci and Ryan 1985). There are four types of extrinsic motivation: integrated
motivation, identified motivation, introjected motivation, and external motivation (c.f., Deci
and Ryan 2000). External motivation and introjected motivation are controlled forms of
motivation, whereas identified motivation, integrated motivation, and intrinsic motivation are
autonomous forms of motivation. Controlled motivation and autonomous motivation are
believed to be associated with negative and positive motivational outcomes, respectively
(Deci and Ryan 2000). For example, evidence has shown that autonomous motivation
predicted satisfaction and intentions to continue participation in sport (Vallerand 2007). This
implies the importance to facilitate one’s autonomous motivation such as intrinsic motivation.
BPNT postulates that the three basic psychological needs are nutriments for one’s
intrinsic motivation. In other words, volunteers’ three basic psychological needs (autonomy,
competence and relatedness) must be nurtured to enhance intrinsic motivation (Deci and
Ryan 2000). Autonomy concerns the need to experience ownership of one’s own behaviors or
choices. Competence refers to the need to feel efficacy in doing activities while achieving
desirable outcomes. Relatedness means the need to sense belonging and connectedness (Deci
and Ryan 1985). Compared with relatedness, autonomy and competence often have a more
proximal or essential role in facilitating intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For
example, Haivas et al. (2013) revealed that autonomy and competence positively predicted
autonomous motivation while relatedness failed to influence autonomous motivation. BPNT
also holds that the three basic psychological needs are closely related to one’s psychological
health and well-being (Deci and Ryan 2000). Thus, the satisfaction of the three basic
psychological needs not only enhance one’s intrinsic motivation but also his/her
psychological well-being (e.g., life satisfaction and job satisfaction).
SDT and Volunteering

Although SDT has been an important motivational theory in areas such as social, education, and sport psychology (Gagné et al. 2010), little research has been done to understand intentions to continue volunteering within this theoretical framework (Haivas et al. 2013). One of the few research conducted found that Canadian volunteers’ motivation positively influenced job satisfaction and negatively predicted turnover intentions (Millette & Gagné, 2008). More recently, Haivas et al. (2013) investigated the relationship among the three basic psychological needs, motivation, and turnover intentions in Romanian volunteers. They found that autonomy and competence predicted volunteers’ autonomous motivation as well as the two psychological needs directly influenced turnover intentions (i.e., the path between autonomous motivation and turnover intention was not significant).

While past studies shed some light on understanding turnover intentions among volunteers through SDT, more work needs to be done within the field. For example, although variables such as motivation, job satisfaction, and turnover intention were included in the study by Millette and Gagné (2008), the relations among them were not tested and unclear. Given that job satisfaction has been identified as a key factor in predicting the retention of volunteers (Barraza 2011; Millette and Gagné 2008; Jacobsen et al. 2012; Silverberg et al. 2001), it could be also useful to extend the study by Haivas et al. (2013) by including job satisfaction in their model (i.e., the relationship among the three basic psychological needs, motivation, and turnover intention). In other words, examining the relationship among the three basic psychological needs, motivation, and job satisfaction will extend our understanding of volunteers’ turnover intention within the SDT framework. Past studies conducted on Western populations may produce certain cultural bias which could limit the generalization of their findings (Haivas et al. 2013). Consequently, future research should be conducted to fill the gap in the volunteering literature.
Volunteering at the Special Olympics

The Special Olympics is an international sport organization that organizes training and competitive events for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The Special Olympics holds World Summer/Winter Games every four years and other competitions at local, regional, and national levels (Special Olympics 2009). There are also Special Olympics organizations at the national level. For example, Special Olympics China was established in 1985 and organizes competitions at various levels for 500,000 athletes with intellectual disabilities in the country (Chen et al. 2011). Apart from organizing training and competition, the Special Olympics has established many other programs. This includes the “Special Olympics China University Initiative” project which aimed to recruit and train university volunteers through workshops and to promote social inclusion (Chen et al. 2011). The Special Olympics programs have brought many benefits to athletes and volunteers (e.g., Baran et al. 2013; Hutzler et al. 2013; Li and Wang 2013). The Special Olympics has become a truly international program with more than 3.4 million participations from all over the world (Chursov 2007).

As a non-profit organization, the success of the Special Olympics depends on volunteers’ commitments and contributions (Chen et al. 2011). For example, volunteer involvement has contributed a lot to Special Olympics achievements in China (Lu 2004). From a practical perspective, it would be easier to retain volunteers rather than recruit new ones as it takes more time and resources to recruit and train new volunteers. Retraining high-quality volunteers relieves the concern regarding the quality and readiness of volunteers for taking on assigned duties (Kim et al. 2007). According to SDT (Deci and Ryan 2000), volunteers who have lower levels of motivation are more likely to have higher turnover intentions. In an effort to retain volunteers for the Special Olympics events, it is necessary to understand volunteer motivation and its correlates. Although few studies have been
conducted to understand volunteer motivation in Special Olympics events (e.g., Khoo and Engelhorn 2011), little is known about the motivational predictors (e.g., competence) and outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction and intention to continue volunteering) among Special Olympics volunteers.

**The Current Research**

Given the aforementioned theoretical and practical significance, the aim of this study was to investigate the relationship among competence, intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and intention to continue volunteering among Chinese Special Olympics volunteers (see Figure 1a). According to SDT, we hypothesized that competence positively predicted intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction (Hypotheses 1 and 2) as well as intrinsic motivation partially mediated the relationship between competence and job satisfaction (Hypothesis 3).

Based on the study by Millette and Gagné (2008), we proposed that job satisfaction positively influenced intention to continue volunteering (Hypothesis 4). Finally, because Haivas et al. (2013) found that there was no direct relationship between autonomous motivation and turnover intention, we proposed that job satisfaction fully mediated the relationship between intrinsic motivation and intention to continue volunteering (Hypothesis 5). However, the partial mediation effect (i.e., an additional path between intrinsic motivation and intention was added at the top of the baseline model) was tested given there was a negative relationship between intrinsic motivation and turnover intention (Millette and Gagné 2008).

(Insert Figure 1a about here)

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants (N = 180) of this study were volunteers at the Special Olympics University Program held in Fuzhou, China in September 2013. They were Chinese undergraduate students, majoring in a variety of subjects such as finance, Chinese literature,
and music. Most of the participants were female \( n = 126, 70\% \) and 54 (30\%) of them were male. Their ages ranged from 17 to 24 years \( M = 20.64, SD = 1.10 \).

**Measures**

The questionnaire included four measures and a few demographic items (e.g., gender and age). For each subscale, participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “not true at all”, 7 = “very true”).

**Competence.** The 4-item Perceived Competence Scale (Williams et al. 1998), one of the most face valid instruments designed to evaluate SDT constructs, was adapted to evaluate participants’ feelings of competence on volunteering (e.g., “I feel confident in my ability to manage my volunteer work”).

**Intrinsic Motivation.** The Volunteer Motivation Scale is a SDT-based scale developed by Millette and Gagné (2008) for assessing volunteer motivation. We used the intrinsic motivation subscale of the scale to measure participants’ intrinsic motivation towards volunteering. The subscale has three items (e.g., “Because I enjoy volunteering very much”).

**Job Satisfaction.** We assessed participants’ job satisfaction using a 3-item Job Satisfaction Scale validated by Mitchell et al. (2001). They used this subscale for determining volunteers’ job satisfaction. An example of an item in this subscale is “All in all, I am satisfied with my volunteer job at organization”.

**Intention to Continue Volunteering.** We borrowed three items used by Kim et al. (2007) to tap participants’ intention to continue volunteering. The subscale was used by Kim et al. to measure volunteers’ intention to continue volunteering. An example of an item is “If I have the opportunity, I would be volunteering for the organization for a long time”.

The English version of the four subscales was translated by a bilingual Chinese graduate student to Chinese and back translated into English by a bilingual psychology
researcher (Brislin 1980). Two other bilingual psychology researchers verified the translation and a few items of the subscales were reworded. Reliability and validity of the four subscales are presented in the Results section.

**Procedures**

Ethics approval to conduct this study was granted by the Special Olympic University Program and the principal researcher’s university. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. There were 208 volunteers who were Chinese undergraduate students from five universities involved in the Special Olympics University Program. Volunteers participated in the one-day Program, which aimed to promote disability awareness and inclusion. Volunteers were assigned tasks such as organizing the Program opening ceremony and playing games with persons with intellectual disabilities at sports venues. Immediately after the event, the researchers administered the questionnaire to the volunteers in a quiet classroom. Participants were encouraged to answer the survey honestly and were informed that there were no correct or wrong answers. They were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. One hundred and eighty volunteers returned the survey (i.e., 86.5% response rate).

**Data Analyses**

The data was preliminarily analyzed using SPSS 20. Subscale scores were reported as means and standard deviations. Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was used to determine internal reliability of subscales with an $\alpha$ value greater than .70 indicating adequate internal consistency (Kidder and Judd 1986). Zero-order correlations between subscales were also computed. Because of the small age range and the disproportionate number of female participants, we did not compare age and gender differences on subscale scores.

In the main analyses, we tested the proposed model and hypotheses using structural equation modeling in AMOS 21 (Arbuckle 2011). Maximum likelihood estimation that has
been demonstrated to withstand departure from normality was used (skewness = -1.30 to -0.51; kurtosis = -0.42 to 1.60, Mardia’s coefficient = 50.44). Given the relative simplicity of the proposed model (see Figure 1a) and the relatively large number of participants, our sample size was deemed appropriate for the main analyses (Kline 2005). As suggested by Brown (2006), we first applied a confirmatory factor analysis to examine the measurement model (i.e., factorial validity) of the subscales. Four subscales were included in the confirmatory factor analysis: competence (four items), intrinsic motivation (three items), job satisfaction (three items), and intention (three items). We then examined the structural model of the proposed model, which was re-specified from the measurement model (cf., Brown, 2006). The following fit indices were used to evaluate model fit: $\chi^2$ to degree of freedom ratio ($\chi^2/df$), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA). A value of $\chi^2/df$ smaller than 3.0 indicated good model fit (Kline, 2005). CFI/TLI values of .90 or higher indicated adequate fit and values of over .95 represented good fit (Hu and Bentler 1999; Marsh et al. 2004). RMSEA values smaller than .08 indicated adequate fit and values less than .06 represented good fit (Hu and Bentler 1999; Marsh et al. 2004). The sizes of explained variance ($R^2$) were used to interpret the practical use of independent variables in predicting dependent variables. Values for $R^2$ around 2%, 13%, and 26% represented small, moderate, and strong effects, respectively (Cohen 1988).

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Table 1 shows the results of mean and standard deviations of subscale scores, internal reliability, and zero-order subscale correlations. Moderate to high subscale scores were found ($M = 5.87$ to 6.29 out of 7.00). All subscales had adequate internal reliability ($\alpha = .74$ to .92), supporting the internal reliability of the subscale used. As expected, competence was
positively correlated with intrinsic motivation \((r = .51, p < .01)\) and job satisfaction \((r = .67, p < .01)\). Job satisfaction was positively related to intention \((r = .64, p < .01)\).

(Insert Table 1 about here)

4 **Structural Equation Modeling**

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis showed that the measurement model had adequate fit to the data, \(\chi^2 (59) = 104.41, \chi^2/df = 1.77, \text{CFI} = .971, \text{TLI} = .961, \text{RMSEA} = .066 (90\%\text{CI} = .044 \text{ to } .086)\). Item factor loadings ranged from .49 to .94 \((M = .79)\). The latent factor correlations between subscales shown in Table 1 were consistent with the findings of the zero-order correlations. These findings supported the factorial validity of the subscales used in this study. The structural model fit the data adequately, \(\chi^2 (61) = 105.33, \chi^2/df = 1.73, \text{CFI} = .971, \text{TLI} = .963, \text{RMSEA} = .064 (90\%\text{CI} = .043 \text{ to } .084)\).

Figure 1b shows the standardized path estimates of the hypothesized model. In line with our Hypotheses 1 and 2, competence positively predicted intrinsic motivation \((\beta = .64, p < .01)\) and job satisfaction \((\beta = .46, p < .01)\). Hypothesis 3 was supported as the result of bootstrapping analysis with 5,000 bootstrap samples indicated that intrinsic motivation was a partial mediator in the relationship between competence and job satisfaction \((\beta = .29, [95\%\text{CI} = 0.17 \text{ to } 0.46]; \text{Preacher and Hayes 2008})\). Job satisfaction positively influenced intention \((\beta = .77, p < .01)\), supporting Hypothesis 4. Model comparison between the baseline model as depicted in Figure 1a and the partial mediation model showed no difference, \(\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 0.64, p > .05; \Delta \text{CFI} = 0 \text{ (Byrne 2006)}\). The path between intrinsic motivation and intention was not significant \((\beta = .11, p > .05)\). Given the baseline model was more parsimonious than the partial mediation model, the baseline model was preferred \(\text{(Bollen 1989)}\). This result supported Hypothesis 5 that job satisfaction acted as a full mediator in the relationship between intrinsic motivation and intention. We also conducted an additional analysis to explore whether there was a direct relationship between competence and intention (i.e., the
model with an additional path from competence to intention at the top of the baseline model).
The path between competence and intention was not significant ($\beta = .07, p > .05$), and the baseline model was again preferred, $\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 0.46, p > .05; \Delta CFI = 0$. Finally, the three independent variables (i.e., competence, intrinsic motivation, and job satisfaction) explained a large variance of intention ($R^2 = 59\%$).

**Discussion**

The success of non-profit organizations such as the Special Olympics relies greatly on volunteers. Given the importance of retaining volunteers, the current study aimed to understand volunteers’ intention to continue volunteering within the theoretical framework of SDT (Deci and Ryan 1985). This study adds to the literature by examining the relationship among competence, intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and intention. The data showed adequate fit to the hypothesized model. Competence, intrinsic motivation, and satisfaction explained a large amount of variance of intention (59%; Cohen 1988). That means SDT is a useful theoretical framework in understanding volunteer intention. The five proposed hypotheses were supported by our study findings. The rest of our discussion will mainly revolve around the hypotheses and their implications.

We found that competence positively predicted intrinsic motivation, which indicates that volunteers who satisfy their competence need show higher degree of intrinsic motivation (Hypothesis 1). This finding is consistent with early SDT-based findings in volunteering and non-volunteering contexts (e.g., Haivas et al. 2013; Ryan and Deci 2000). According to SDT, competence should be facilitated to nurture one’s intrinsic motivation. SDT also postulates that satisfying competence promotes optimal consequence (Deci and Ryan 2000). Our finding agrees with this contention showing that competence positively influenced job satisfaction (Hypothesis 2).
The result of mediation analysis demonstrated that intrinsic motivation was a partial mediator in the relationship between competence and job satisfaction (Hypothesis 3). This finding, for the first time, enables us to understand the underlying mechanisms among these three variables. It also implies that increasing volunteer competence has a direct impact on their job satisfaction. Job satisfaction was found to positively predict intention (Hypothesis 4), supporting the finding by Millette and Gagné (2008). It seems that the above findings, where applicable (i.e., Hypotheses 1 and 4), were not context- or culture-specific as they are parallel to earlier study results found in the western context (Haivas et al. 2013; Millette and Gagné 2008). We innovatively examined the relationship among intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and intention (Hypothesis 5) to extend the study by Millette and Gagné (2008) and understand the underlying processes among these variables. We found that job satisfaction was a full mediator rather than a partial mediator in the relationship between intrinsic motivation and intention. In order words, there was no direct effect of intrinsic motivation on intention.

Several theoretical and practical implications can be derived from the above findings to retain volunteers. First, our study findings showed that the mechanisms underpinning the relationship between competence and intention via intrinsic motivation/job satisfaction further our understanding of the relationship for the selected variables and is important for theory building. Second, it is meaningful for administrators to increase volunteers’ competence to enhance their job satisfaction and intention. For example, administrators may allow volunteers to choose tasks/duties that they are more confident in doing and providing positive feedback to increase their competence (Deci and Ryan 2000). Third, as intrinsic motivation positively predicted intention via job satisfaction, administrators should make volunteer activities more intrinsically interesting for volunteers. Last, according to our findings, job satisfaction was an important predictor of intention. In addition to promoting
competence and intrinsic motivation, administrators can customize job characteristics (e.g., skill variety and task significance) to increase volunteers’ job satisfaction (Millette and Gagné 2008). Overall, these findings shed some light on training, managing, and retaining volunteers in China, which might also be applicable elsewhere.

There are a few limitations in this study. First, similar to early studies within this field (i.e., Haivas et al. 2013; Millette and Gagné 2008), we used cross-sectional data to examine our hypothesized model. Thus, the casual relationship among the variables should be interpreted with caution. Future studies should use longitudinal or experimental designs to test the model. Second, our research exclusively relied on self-reported measures, which may induce common-method biases (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Third, our participants were from one event (i.e., the Special Olympics University Program), so the findings may not be generalized to other contexts. Thus, replication of the current study is necessary. Last, although this is the first study to investigate the relationship among competence, intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and intention, only some SDT-based constructs were used. Future research may integrate other SDT-based constructs (e.g., autonomy and controlled motivation) into the current model to provide a full picture of volunteer motivation. Future investigations could also integrate SDT with other theoretical frameworks (e.g., Theory of Planning Behavior; Ajzen 1991) to understand intention given the large unexplained variance (41%).

In conclusion, this study contributes to the existing literature, which was the first to examine the relationships among competence, intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and intention among volunteers. Our study supports SDT as a significant framework in explaining intention as well as revealed that competence, intrinsic motivation, and job satisfaction were important predictors of intention. It is through this research that the underlying processes among competence, intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and intention are better understood. The current study provides a basis for future research of volunteering intention.
References


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community: Issues and opportunities for teaching and learning in sociology. *Learning and Teaching in the Social Sciences, 1*, 33-50. doi:10.1386/ltss.1.1.33/0


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25
**Tab. 1** Internal reliability, descriptive statistics and correlations between studied variables

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*Note.* SD = Standard Deviation; The latent factor correlations are presented above the diagonal and the zero-order correlations are presented below the diagonal.

** p < .01.
Fig. 1 Hypothesized full structural equation model and standardized estimates for the model. The partial mediation model refers the model with an additional path from intrinsic motivation to intention at the top of the baseline model (Figure 1a). COM = Competence, IM = Intrinsic Motivation, SAT = Job Satisfaction, INT = Intention. All the estimated paths are significant at the .01 level.
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**Appx. 1** Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlation between individual items

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### VOLUNTEERING MOTIVATION

#### Table

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<td>6.36</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>6.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* COM = Competence, IM = Intrinsic Motivation, SAT = Job Satisfaction, INT = Intention, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.

**p < .01, *p < .05.