Introduction

This paper is about many interpretations of the effects of volunteerism in both your respective area and around the globe. It asks questions like whether it is better to serve without knowledge of your effect and have your heart in the right place or to never serve at all knowing it wouldn’t have made a large enough difference. This essay also examines reasons why people volunteer, how they perceive themselves, and what those being served think or feel.

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Criticisms on Volunteerism

Humans are inherently compassionate animals. If we weren’t, the species would have an incredibly hard time surviving. Our too fragile young wouldn’t be cared for and we would all be pitted against each other. Our compassion is one of the reasons we have flourished, and continue to do so, but we realize this is still an imperfect world. There is poverty and suffering all around the world and even in countries that are more developed. We help each other as best as we can through mission trips and volunteer programs to create our more perfect, ideal world, convinced that we’re doing more good than harm. Volunteering will always contain a positive connotation, but the real question is, should it?

For example, if we stay in a foreign country building homes for people that are less fortunate for a week then go back to our normal lives feeling refreshed and morally righteous are we helping others because they need it or we do? Ivan Illich, in his speech, “To Hell with Good Intentions” states, “You will not help anybody by your good intentions.” This essentially means that our compassion and having your, ‘heart in the right place’ will not guarantee that what you are doing will benefit the people you are working for or serving. Further in the speech, Illich references the Peace Corps and other organizations that allow middle/upper class people to go to impoverish parts of countries abroad when if they went to work in their own country, “to help the poor there "help themselves." Very soon [they] would be either spit upon or laughed at.” His overall point is that the volunteers know too little about the impact of their own actions. Illich instead recommends that people stick to their home countries because “You will know what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how to communicate with those to whom you speak.” People get so caught up in the feeling of doing good they can’t imagine that there would be any negative repercussions on the communities they are serving. This is also pointed out in the Kretzmann and McKnight’s evaluation of service in low income communities. The big idea from their essay titled *Assets Based Community Development* is that these neighborhoods can lose their independence so much that they rely on outside organizations and people to help change their community. Kretzmann and McKnight describe this as client-server effect. The poorer neighborhoods are the clients. They no longer need anyone from their own community to help them since the service groups will come ready and willing to for free. Both of these articles outline the fact that people serving others does not necessarily lead to a better world. Instead, service can hurt more than it can help because the communities that are supposed to be benefitting are suffering from an inability to help themselves.

Citizenship is an important part of volunteering. However, just being from an area doesn’t mean that you can understand all parts of your community and the effects you will have on it. As Peter Block states in his article, *From Citizenship to Leadership*, “citizenship is our agreement to receive rights and privileges from the community and, in so doing, to pay for them through our willingness to live within certain boundaries and act in the interest of the whole.” The volunteering that you do in your own area could be seen as fulfillment of this kind of “contract.” While you could avoid some of the ignorance that is seen from service members working in foreign countries or different areas of the place they live, there are still possible ramifications from your work like in all other places.

In an other Block article, he states that, “the question here is not about the nature of the struggles; it is about the nature of the cure.” (*The Fragmented Community and Its Transition*). This phrase is powerful in that it once again reminds us that putting a Band-Aid on one issue will not solve what ever underlying issue is there. For example, one of the most common solutions for poverty is education because, as most people know/assume, if you get a good education, you will get a good job, and if you get a good job you will lead a good life and if you live a good, honest life so will your children and their children and so on. In Coles’ book *The Call of Service*, he details different peoples’ experiences, one of them being a college kid looking to help out the local community by tutoring children in the Ghetto. He wrote about the college kid’s own father who said that all “a black boy really needs is to work hard he can make it, and he can go to a good school.” He revels that the father is trustee of a New England private school and that the school is always “begging for black kids but they’re hard to come by.” The college student realized first hand that volunteering can sometimes force you to recognize the haves verses the have-nots and even the value of education in different socio-economic backgrounds.

Though it is never outlined in Coles’ book, the other stories told can be associated with this snippet from Adam Davis’ *What We Don’t Talk About When We Don’t Talk About Service*, “Here is an exaggerated pass at the relation between inequality and service: I serve you because I want to; I choose to. You receive my service because you have to; you need it. I live in the realm of freedom; you live in the realm of necessity. Serving you, I confirm my relative superiority. Being served, you confirm your inferiority.” Few people who come from tough or poor areas will partake in volunteerism. What does that say about the practice? It can be argued that it further solidifies the fact that people who volunteer and those who receive the donation of time or effort are on opposite ends of the spectrum. In John Wilson and Mark Musick’s article, *The Effects of Volunteering On the Volunteer,* “Research studies show that most people do in fact hold the belief that helping others is a good way to gain fulfillment for yourself.” So people that do the volunteering along with being on different economic levels are also on the “moral high ground?” Not many people would put it do blatantly nor would anyone say it out loud however the question still comes up; Do the people serving think they are better than the ones being served?

In John Wilson’s *Annual Review of Sociology*, he states that, “Volunteering can be seen as an extension of private behavior into the public sphere.” I believe that people who volunteer contain more empathy or perhaps more initiative to show compassion than others. Values play a large roll in the desire to do this kind of work however some, for instance, might simply lack the opportunity to get involved. I have been given the chance to work and to donate my time so I do. I don’t think this makes me better than those who do not give their time nor does it make me better than those I may serve. “Every one is born into life as a blank page…Our lives are our story, and our story is our life.” (Baldwin, *Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*). I don’t want my story to be an egocentric novel about me, me, me. Volunteerism allows me to focus on others and tell their story because one of my favorite parts of serving others is getting to know them. The, “So What?” kind of questions from that article forces you to look deeper into what you are doing and helps you to realize your impact. Though that can be seen as tedious, it is ultimately beneficial to understand your personal power.

I serve because despite all of theses criticisms, I still believe that volunteering does more good than harm. Humans are pack animals and because of this we are compassionate, though maybe to a fault when all social and economic implications like these are weighed. However, people wanting to help people is still a really great thing. It shows that we have not lost our “bleeding hearts,” if you will, amongst all the selfies and self-absorbent nature of the twenty-first century. I think these criticisms are a good thing because they bring light to the parts of volunteerism that need to be addressed whether the issues are caused by the volunteers themselves or the organizations that put them to work. I love to help others because it makes me feel like my time is well spent and I am actually changing something for someone. It’s tangible and real. Therefore, understanding what kind of an impact I am going to have on an area is not only insightful but important to me. I can respect and appreciate all criticisms of volunteering so that I can educate myself and others as well as change practices and improve the quality of service I provide.

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