

Organizational Identification and Volunteer Workers:

A Study of Red Cross Disaster Volunteers

By

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The explosion in the number of nonprofit organizations in recent years has created an environment of intense competition for one of the sector's most important resources – volunteers. With three times as many nonprofit organizations in the U.S. as there were only 20 years ago (Bridgestar, 2007), committed volunteers are in high demand. As could be expected in a society that emphasizes workers' market value, the contributions of volunteers are frequently undervalued or overlooked.

Defined as “work performed without monetary recompense” (Freeman 1997, p. 141), the efforts of volunteers are often viewed as merely supplementing the work of paid staff (Wilson & Musick, 1999). In an effort to draw attention to the true market value of volunteer work, *Independent Sector*, the country's leading coalition of charities, foundations, and corporate giving programs, estimated the value of a volunteer hour in 2006 at \$18.77 (Independent Sector, 2007). Clearly, the societal contributions of nonprofits would be severely curtailed if they were suddenly required to compensate volunteer workers. Indeed, many organizations could simply not exist without them. The following literature review is provided as background to an examination of organizational identification and its expression as commitment within the context of volunteerism.

### Literature Review

There has been considerable research into organizational commitment and identification among workers employed for pay. In contrast, research on these processes among volunteers is thin. The following section reviews the literature on

organizational commitment and identification, as well as satisfaction, which frequently is associated with attachment to organizations.

*Role of volunteers in the American Red Cross*

The central role of volunteers in the American Red Cross is declared in the organization's mission statement that describes it as a "humanitarian organization, led by volunteers . . ." (ARC Volunteer Philosophy). While many nonprofit organizations can claim volunteer leadership through their boards of directors and governance committees, the Red Cross depends on volunteers to serve not only in leadership roles but also to bear the responsibility for much of its front line service delivery: teaching CPR classes, assisting with collections of blood, and perhaps most important, providing direct assistance to victims of disaster.

The increasing frequency and magnitude of disasters in the United States requires the cooperation and contributions of many nonprofit groups to support victims through the recovery process. The American Red Cross, however, bears a unique responsibility in times of disaster. One of approximately 100 organizations chartered by the United States Congress, the American Red Cross is the sole organization congressionally mandated to provide disaster relief, both domestically and internationally (ARC Governance for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 2006).

Because of its unique role, the American Red Cross is the primary responder and coordinator of other relief agencies (Voluntary Agencies Active in Disaster [VOAD]) in times of major disaster. Because of its primary role, the Red Cross is

usually the organization most visible in the relief operation and often the best source of information concerning the scope of the disaster.

However, in addition to the high profile disasters that affect thousands of people and capture the interest of the media, the American Red Cross must also respond to the smaller disasters that may affect only one or a handful of families. On average, the American Red Cross responds to more than 70,000 natural and man-made disasters every year (American Red Cross, 2007). In order to maintain this level of response, the organization depends on its corps of nearly 600,000 trained volunteers who provide not only a critical service for the Red Cross but a human safety net for the nation as a whole.

Equal to the responsibilities borne by disaster volunteers are the sacrifices they are asked to make to fulfill their commitment. Disaster volunteers are required to take a minimum of 40 hours of training before they are first called to respond, even on a local basis. They are expected to attend regular team meetings and to keep apprised of current policies, regulations, price lists, referral sources and other information required in their role.

Those volunteers who wish to respond to disasters on a national level, becoming part of the national Disaster Services Human Resources system, make even greater sacrifices. Aside from the additional training that is required, these individuals must be willing to leave their homes and families for a minimum three-week assignment. Once at the scene of the disaster, they often spend those three weeks living under the most primitive conditions of comfort and hygiene, a result of

disaster-caused damage to the community's infrastructure. Although they receive a stipend for meals and travel expenses, disaster volunteers frequently work 16-hour days, sleeping at night on cots in emergency shelters (American Red Cross). Yet, many volunteers continue their service year after year, often until their own health concerns limit their ability to take on hardship assignments.

Because the continued capacity of the American Red Cross to respond to disasters carries important implications for the safety and security of American society, it is appropriate and worthwhile to understand what factors may contribute to the organization's ability to attract and retain disaster volunteers.

#### *Identification and Volunteer Retention*

What influences individuals' decision to give up their free time to support the goals of an organization without any expectation of financial reward? Some studies of volunteerism have concluded that people who volunteer do so out of a sense of obligation but, if given the option, they would prefer to shift the responsibility to others (Freeman, 1997). This interpretation may offer an insight into why people may agree to serve as a church greeter or even as coach of a child's soccer team, but it falls far short of explaining the extraordinary dedication demonstrated by Red Cross disaster volunteers. Clearly, such dedication is the result of a powerful force in play between the volunteer and the organization.

Scholars contend that the willingness to expend so much effort to support the goals of an organization, described as commitment, is the outcome of an individual's identification with the organization (Steers, 1977). Characterized as a "cognitive

connection,” organizational identification describes a state of being in which the individual perceives an organization as possessing the same attributes they perceive in themselves (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). By emphasizing particular values that the organization and the individual hold in common, the strength of the member’s identification is enhanced (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, & Ganesh 2004, p. 80). More measurable than values, behaviors that demonstrate loyalty to the organization and its policies can be valid indicators of organizational identification (Cheney et al. 2004, p. 112).

Perhaps more than most organizations, the American Red Cross places great value on its collective identity, emphasizing those attributes that are “distinctive, central, and enduring” (Dutton et al. 1994, p. 243). Through organizational communication, leaders and members celebrate the American Red Cross’ role as part of the worldwide Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and its more than 125 years of service in times of war and peace. Relics and stories of its founder, Clara Barton, historical posters marking fund drives dating to World War I, and photos of presidents and celebrities speaking on behalf of the organization occupy a prominent place in most Red Cross offices. The organization acts to facilitate the identification process by recognizing volunteer service with pins and certificates bearing the Red Cross emblem. At meetings and other gatherings, long time volunteers, like military veterans, often wear hats and sashes displaying a collection of pins commemorating the disaster operations on which they have served. Volunteers connect with one another by sharing stories of their experiences while on disaster assignment. For

many years, an emotional highlight of every Red Cross convention was the parade of hundreds of volunteers marching together under the Red Cross flag. Such opportunities for identification are only intensified for disaster volunteers.

Aside from the organization's formal efforts to encourage identification among all its members, the necessity for the organization's disaster volunteers to be recognized as representatives of the Red Cross during the course of serving the public contributes to the identification process. For their own safety and to facilitate delivery of service, volunteers in the field are required to wear disaster vests emblazoned with a large Red Cross logo and carry Red Cross identification cards. In addition, many volunteers purchase caps, jackets, and other apparel that identify them as Red Cross workers. At an even deeper level, the thorough training volunteers receive provides a vehicle for transmission of the organization's core values.

The policies and procedures that dictate how disaster services are to be delivered are grounded in the seven principles of the worldwide Red Cross Movement: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality (Redcross.org). For example, volunteers are frequently called upon to serve people from backgrounds and circumstances that may challenge their own personal standards, but they are trained to approach such situations in a humanitarian manner, withholding personal judgment. The injunction to maintain such high standards may trigger the recollection of "memorable messages" (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981) imparted by parents and other authority figures as guides to behavior.



In the performance of their duties, and through their ‘talk’ with one another, disaster volunteers reinforce the organizational values and, in doing so, act to co-create their identities. Indeed, Gundry and Rousseau (1994) found that it is through such organizational activities and interactions that formative messages are conveyed and members begin to understand their own role within the organization. Thus, by embracing the noble values of the Red Cross, volunteers may strengthen the foundation of their personal values (Smith and Ellis, 2001) while enhancing their own self-esteem and bringing deeper meaning to their lives (Cheney, 1983, p. 145).

As volunteers identify more deeply with the organization’s values, they may seek to further define themselves by differentiating their group from others doing similar work (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Frequently, disaster relief efforts require volunteers from two or more organizations to cooperate on a particular task. On several occasions over the past 23 years, the researcher has had the opportunity to listen to disaster volunteers recounting their experiences. It is common to hear volunteers criticize workers from particular religious organizations, criticizing them for refusing service to some victims because of particular lifestyles. Indeed, as Cheney et al. (2004) argue, to the extent the values expressed by representatives of other organizations are perceived as being in opposition, or even threatening to, the values the volunteers hold in common with the Red Cross, their identification may be deepened.

On other occasions, volunteers have shared stories of incidents where they received accolades and special treatment from the public because of their association

with the Red Cross. While such intense in-group interactions and the high levels of public approval experienced during a disaster assignment may strengthen identification with the Red Cross, when the organization becomes the object of criticism, volunteers may experience a threat to their personal self-esteem (Cheney, 1983).

#### *Organizational Identification in Crisis Situations*

All organizations that depend on public support must continuously focus on maintaining a positive identity. However, sustaining a favorable reputation while responding to a crisis is especially challenging (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p. 241). To be successful, the Red Cross must continue to define itself in a way that differentiates it from the thousands of other organizations (Cheney & Christensen, 2001) while remaining true to the values shared by its dedicated volunteer corps (Cheney, 1983). Following Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma in 2005, the largest disaster relief effort in the organization's history, the Red Cross experienced an unfamiliar wave of negative public opinion. The criticism of the Red Cross response, especially its management practices, and the resulting congressional scrutiny of its national governance board, has tested the organization's ability to convincingly preserve its identity as one of the most trusted and respected organizations in the country.

While maintaining the confidence of the public is essential to the Red Cross' ability to attract financial contributions, it is equally important to the retention and recruitment of volunteers. Because of their close association with the organization,

Red Cross volunteers are concerned with the organization's image, what they believe others outside the organization think of it (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) and, by extension, what others think of them. Criticism of the Red Cross disaster response in 2005 was especially painful for the thousands of volunteers who personally participated in the prolonged relief effort. Much of the criticism was based on the organization's falling short of high public expectations that it be omnipresent in times of disaster – a charge that reflected directly on front line disaster volunteers.

While there is evidence that identification can persist even in the face of criticism (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), changes in an individual's perceptions of the organization's identity can lead to changes in members' behavior (Dutton et al., 1994). In the case of strongly identified volunteers, criticism of the organization may result in personal feelings of disappointment and shame leading eventually to disengagement with the organization (Dutton et al., 1994). Such a negative outcome of identification with the organization underscores the importance of understanding more about the identification process in volunteers.

#### *Volunteers and Commitment*

A volunteer's level of commitment, operationalized for this study with the components established by Porter, Steers, Mowday and Boulian (1974) as defining organizational commitment (having congruent values, having the intent to continue in volunteer service, and being willing to expend considerable effort on behalf of the organization) can be understood as an "expression of or consequence of identification" with the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). More than simply an

outcome of identification, however, the level of commitment offers an insight into the strength of that identification (Steers, 1977, p.46). A strongly identified individual has a personal stake in the continued success of the organization and, therefore, may be more likely to cooperate fully with other members, to embrace the organization's goals as his own (Steers, 1977), and to make decisions with the good of the organization in mind (Cheney, 1983).

In a voluntary organization such as the American Red Cross where there is no financial reward for one's work, the internal motivation to exert effort for the benefit of the organization and the desire to continue and deepen the relationship, factors associated with commitment, become especially salient (Steers, 1977). Especially for volunteers serving on disaster operations where the ultimate beneficiaries of their service, disaster victims, are frequently unknown to them, the sense of obligation they feel may be directed at the organization (Penner, 2000).

Volunteers' commitment to an organization is related to the degree of satisfaction they feel with their work experience (Dorsch et al., 2002). An important factor in volunteers' level of satisfaction relates to their working conditions (Steers, 1977). In particular, volunteers want to feel comfortable with the organization's policies and procedures and how they are communicated. National disaster jobs within the Red Cross are governed by nationally-established policies and procedures. At the local level, these general policies apply, but specific policies covering the level of relief provided may vary. A local disaster volunteer working with a family whose home has just been destroyed by fire must work within the limitations of policies

made by others. For example, a cost-saving decision to discontinue the policy allowing volunteers to provide replacement mattresses to fire victims was quickly rescinded when family assistance volunteers became upset that they could no longer offer the same level of service as in the past.

### *Commitment and Satisfaction*

Perhaps more than those who receive extrinsic benefits from their work, volunteers need to believe that their efforts make a positive difference. Wilson and Musick (1999) further argue that if they feel that the time they have given has been wasted, they are likely to leave the organization.

Because so much is asked of them, in the absence of any extrinsic financial reward, disaster volunteers must find significant personal satisfaction in their role to remain involved. Indeed, for those who give so much of themselves, feeling that their gifts of time and personal commitment make a positive difference in the lives of others is essential (Wilson & Musick, 1999). Moreover, the organization must not disappoint the volunteer. Volunteers who find their actual experience to fall short of satisfying their original motivations to volunteer are more likely to leave the organization (Clary et al., 1998). Not only is role satisfaction necessary to retain volunteers, research shows that a significant number of new volunteers come to organizations through relationships with current volunteers, indicating that satisfaction is also a factor in volunteer recruitment (US Department of Labor, 2007).

### *Competing Identities and Commitment*

While the Red Cross remains the primary disaster relief agency in the country, many other organizations have found their own niche within the disaster relief arena. Some groups specialize in collecting used clothing (Nazarenes), others have invested in large mobile kitchens where food is prepared to be delivered by the Red Cross (Southern Baptists), while still others focus on building or rebuilding individual homes (Habitat for Humanity). To some degree, all of these organizations are competing for the same volunteers, in many cases without the training requirements and time commitments necessary to Red Cross disaster relief work.

It is important, then, to understand what factors may contribute to an individual's identification with the role of Red Cross volunteer versus the role of generic volunteer. Research suggests that prolonged contact with an organization allows individuals increased opportunities to express themselves as organizational members, making the organization more attractive and strengthening the identification (Dutton et al. 1994). With the availability of multiple identities within the organization, some activities such as traveling to a remote area to take food to disaster victims may reinforce identification as a Red Cross volunteer while another activity such as taking a turn as the night duty caseworker may reinforce identification with the generic volunteer role (Scott et al. 1998).

Although the rich culture of the American Red Cross may facilitate strong identification with the organization, it would be a mistake to assume that all volunteers who love their work are highly identified with the American Red Cross. Indeed, within the area of disaster services there exist several unique volunteer jobs

with specialized training, sub-groups, and career paths. Some volunteers take great pride in their ability to perform these specialized tasks and may come to feel a sense of oneness (Ashforth & Mael) with others who perform similar tasks rather than with the larger organization (Becker & Carper, 1956). For example, volunteers trained in the Records and Reports function may take great pride in the accuracy they bring to the work, feeling satisfied that after their three-week assignment is over, the next volunteer assigned to the job will be able to find all the client casework data accessible, complete and correct. Volunteers in this position may be more strongly identified with a particular task than they are with the Red Cross. Conversely, volunteers strongly identified with the Red Cross may find the role of Red Cross volunteer more salient than the alternative role of generic volunteer and may perceive commonalities in what they believe to be the attributes of the organization and their own personal attributes (Dutton et al., 1994).

Looking into a future where natural disasters are predicted to be more numerous and more destructive, it is important for the safety of the nation that the American Red Cross be able to fulfill its congressional mandate to respond to disasters and to do so in the most efficient and cost effective way possible. A strong corps of committed volunteers is essential to meeting this challenge. While much scholarship has been devoted to understanding how individuals become identified with organizations that employ them (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, Cheney & McMillan, 1990, Dutton et al., 1994, Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), little has been done to evaluate the identification of unpaid workers (volunteers) with the organization. Examining

organizational identification in the absence of financial incentives to continue may provide a clarified understanding of the process.

### *Identification*

It is most appropriate to examine volunteer identification through a communications lens as “It is through rhetoric that the identification process takes place – that the “I” becomes “we” (Cheney, 1991, p. 20). In a society where the traditional ties to community have weakened, individuals must look for new ways to bring meaning to their lives (Cheney, 1983). While at one time in our history it may have seemed absurd to attribute human values to an organization, the corporate person described by Cheney and McMillan (1990) has emerged as an entity so pervasive and powerful in today’s society as to have become a “resource for identity” (Cheney & McMillan, 1990, p. 97).

Building on Burke, Cheney (1983) asserts that societal forces divide and categorize people: they feel a deep sense of estrangement. In response to this existential pain, individuals seek some target with which they can identify, thus reestablishing a cognitive sense of oneness (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Today, individuals are likely to find the meaning they are seeking by developing that sense of oneness with groups of people within an organization.

One category of worker that seeks meaning through organizational associations is volunteers. Volunteer work occurs within organizations (Penner, 2002). Willingly exerting themselves on behalf of an organization without any expectation of financial reward, volunteers are motivated to affiliate with an



organization for a variety of reasons, but primarily as a way to express their altruistic values (Clary et al., 1998, Penner, 2000). Indeed, through identification, the individual perceives the organization's values as his own (Cheney, 1983) and this identification is enhanced when the organization's values and practices are unusually distinctive (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Furthermore, when these values are held in high esteem by society, individuals' association with the organization enhances their own self-esteem (Cheney, 1983).

Individuals' self-esteem is at risk when they associate with an organization that is highly visible. The strength of identification is influenced by the anticipated reactions of others. Hence, the relationship between an organization's attractiveness and the strength of a member's identification is affected by the visibility of the affiliation (Dutton et al. 1994).

### *Multiple Identities*

Some scholars have viewed organizations as sources of multiple identities (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998, Russo, 1998). Conceptualizing various identities as "regions," Scott et al. (1998) assert that, at various times, certain actions or activities, may activate one or more regions rendering them more salient to the individual at that moment. While some scholars have suggested that identification can occur outside of interaction (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994), Scott and colleagues argue that identification is a communicative process emerging through interactions with others. Thus, different interactions related to various organizational functions can activate different identities.

For example, an individual's identity is found not only in relation to the organization but may be derived from a particular work group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The availability of several identities with an organization may act to weaken the identification, as rather than integrating multiple identities, individuals may resolve cognitive identity conflicts by creating a buffer surrounding competing identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 30).

Seeking to uncover nuances of identification, some organizational scholars have described individual workers who identify strongly with a particular job function or set of tasks (Becker & Carper, 1956, Russo, 1998). In these instances, the tasks so define the individuals that they may see themselves being equally satisfied performing similar work in other organizations.

In the volunteer arena, those who limit their volunteer service to just one organization may be more likely to become identified with that organization. By contrast, those who occupy different volunteer positions, volunteering for several organizations may develop a "volunteer role identity" (Dorsch et al., 2002 p.7).

#### *Commitment*

Defined as the "relative strength of an individual's identification with or involvement in a particular organization" (Steers, 1977, p. 46), commitment provides important insights into organizational members' level of identification. Committed workers willingly exert personal effort in support of the organization's goals, adopting those goals as their own. Most salient for the purpose of this study,

committed members feel a strong desire to remain with the organization (Steers, 1977).

### *The Competitive Volunteer Environment*

During the past two decades, the number of nonprofit organizations in the United States has grown threefold (Bridgestar, 2007). In recent years, however the rate of volunteering has shown some decline (BLS News Jan., 2007). In its latest report on volunteering in the United States, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 26.7 percent of the population performed some volunteer service in 2006, a 2.1 percent decline compared to the previous three years. Among those who volunteered, the majority gave their time to religious causes, with only 12.7 percent of respondents volunteering in social service organizations like the American Red Cross (BLS News, Jan. 2007). As a result, competition for volunteers is becoming more intense.

### *Satisfaction*

Research conducted by the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy found that many of the same characteristics that characterize paid workers apply to volunteers. Satisfaction with their work experience was the best predictor of a volunteer's commitment to the organization followed by the strength of their identification with the organization's values (Dorsch et al., 2002). Unlike paid workers who may have financial and other incentives to consider, volunteers who are dissatisfied, feeling that their time has been wasted, are likely to leave the organization (Wilson & Musick, 1999).

## Research Questions

Drawing on the literature, the following questions were posed for this study:

RQ1: Are there significant differences in volunteers' reports of their identification with the American Red Cross based on their experience in local or national disasters?

RQ2: Are there significant differences in volunteers' reports of their identification with the American Red Cross based on whether they volunteer for other organizations?

RQ3: How are levels of commitment reported by Red Cross volunteers related to identification with the American Red Cross?

RQ4: How are levels of volunteer satisfaction related to identification with the American Red Cross?

RQ5: How are levels of felt appreciation by other disaster volunteers and Red Cross supervisors related to identification and satisfaction?

RQ6: What themes and memorable messages emerge from participants' accounts of their volunteer experience?

## Method

This study examined organizational identification among a group of disaster volunteers affiliated with the Greater Kansas City and Midland Empire Chapters of the American Red Cross. The study was approved by both staff and volunteer leadership, as well as by the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence, the University of Kansas' institutional review board.

Participants were asked to complete a two-part survey measuring strength of identification with the American Red Cross as an organization. The survey instrument was a modified version of the Organizational Identification Questionnaire (OIQ: Cheney, 1982). Consistent with the literature, reliability analysis of the scale items showed high internal reliability, Cronbach's alpha = .82.

A short Job Satisfaction scale, drawn from the themes in the Job Descriptive Index (Balzer, Kihm, Smith, Irwin, Bachiochi, Robie, Sinar, & Parra, 1997) was used to measure volunteer satisfaction. Internal reliability for this scale was relatively low (Cronbach's alpha = .52). The survey also asked for information about participants' experience as Red Cross disaster volunteers and whether they volunteer for other organizations.

A set of open-ended questions was included to enable the researcher to identify overarching themes and meaningful messages participants reported they would share about the Red Cross and their involvement in it. Approaching the research from a communicative perspective, the researcher attempted to identify consistent phrases and themes that provide a deeper understanding of the survey results.

### Participants

The researcher previously obtained permission from two local American Red Cross units to access their corps of approximately 250 disaster volunteers. The volunteers were all adults, age 18 and older. As an employee of the Red Cross, the researcher was authorized to personally address disaster volunteers during their

monthly organizational meetings and to access the names and addresses of those volunteers who were not present at the meetings. Volunteers were given early notification of the study through the disaster volunteer newsletter.

#### Data Gathering and Analysis

Several data gathering tools were used. First, volunteers attending the monthly meetings were notified of the study and encouraged to participate. A computer link to a survey available through the SurveyMonkey electronic platform also was emailed to all disaster volunteers by the chapter's staff volunteer coordinator. The consent form accompanying the questionnaire assured participants of their anonymity and their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

In order to preserve confidentiality, only the researcher had access to the study, although a summary of the results will be provided to American Red Cross staff and volunteer leadership. During the course of the study, all materials have been safeguarded by the researcher and not stored on Red Cross premises. At the conclusion of the study, all research materials will be destroyed.

#### *Thematic Analysis*

To yield a more comprehensive understanding of factors that may influence volunteers' intention to continue as organizational members, it is helpful to probe more deeply certain attitudes that may not be immediately apparent from quantitative data (Babbie, 2004). As qualitative studies of work groups have been shown to be particularly productive (Babbie, 2004), an analysis of emergent themes embedded in the responses to open-ended questions may reveal common attitudes held by

volunteer workers (Aronson, 1994). Such written appraisals can be an effective tool in a thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

By identifying basic themes then organizing them by related ideas and finally global themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001), attitudinal patterns (Babbie, 2004) may emerge that may provide an insight into volunteers' deepest feelings about the organization. The use of the participants' own words serves to strengthen the validity of the interpretation (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

#### *Memorable Messages*

Another effective means to explore the individual's deepest beliefs about an organization may be through the analysis of memorable messages. Embedded in the vast number of messages one receives over a lifetime are a handful that remain in the foreground of our memory and influence the direction of our lives (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981). These are messages people call on to interpret, characterize or to articulate their experience or feelings about a phenomenon or organization. Within organizations, Gundry and Rousseau (1994) found that memorable messages about the organization's values are often conveyed through "critical incidents," activities and interactions that have a formative effect on the members' beliefs about the organization. Indeed, the process of assessing one's own behavior against the values conveyed through memorable messages may play a role in formation of the individual's standards for personal behavior (Smith & Ellis, 2001), influencing their satisfaction with their organizational role.

To better understand the degree of organizational identification among volunteers, this study sought to examine the levels of organizational identification, organizational commitment, and volunteer satisfaction reported by Red Cross disaster volunteers. By comparing these reports in light of volunteers' experience levels, arguments can be made about whether the volunteers feel a "volunteer identity" or a "Red Cross volunteer identity." Finally, analysis of common themes and memorable messages reported by participants illuminate identity triggers that draw volunteers to the Red Cross and support their staying with the organization.

The process of thematic analysis in this study involved collecting responses to each of the open-ended questions. The responses then were sorted multiple times on the basis of similarities among the comments. Decisions about what counted as a category came both from the literature and from participants' own words.

## Results

Of the approximately 250 disaster volunteers in the relevant population, after an initial data-gathering wave and a follow-up request, 52 responded, a response rate of 21%. Results of the survey are reported by research question.

### *The role of experience in national disasters on organizational identification*

In an effort to identify factors that may influence the strength of volunteers' identification with the Red Cross, RQ1 sought to measure whether experience serving on higher profile national disaster operations would lead to a stronger level of identification. First, participants in the study had high scores overall on the



organizational identification questionnaire (OIQ) (Cheney, 1983). Mean score was 97.12 (minimum=81, maximum=114, standard deviation = 7.37).

An analysis of variance showed no statistically significant differences in means for the organizational identification instrument ( $F = .75, p = .76$ ) based on the number of national disaster teams participants had served on. Moreover, the number of local disaster assignments on which respondents participated was not statistically significantly related to organizational identification ( $F = .93, p = .57$ )

A central objective of the study was to discern subtle differences between identification with the Red Cross organization as distinguished from identification with the generic role of volunteer and how these differences may relate to commitment and satisfaction with the organization. RQ2 sought to determine the difference in reported organizational identification for participants who volunteer only for the American Red Cross and those who also volunteer for other organizations. This could serve as the basis of an argument that individuals whose only volunteer work is for the Red Cross identify with the role of Red Cross volunteer while those who also volunteer for other organizations may identify more with the generic role of volunteer. The analysis, however, showed no difference in organizational identification ( $F = 1.11, p = .30$ ) between Red Cross volunteers who work exclusively for the Red Cross and Red Cross volunteers who also give their time to other organizations. Differences in organizational identification between volunteers who are currently employed and those who are not also were not significant ( $F = .99, p = .33$ ).

The third research question addressed the relationship of commitment to the Red Cross with levels of identification with the organization. Commitment was operationalized as scores on three items reflecting the three components of the most widely-used characterization of organizational commitment: "(a) a strong belief in, and acceptance of, the organization's goals and values; (b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and (c) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization" (Porter, Steers, Mowday & Boulian, 1974, p. 604). The three items used in this study were "I find that my values and the values of the Red Cross are very similar," "I would be willing to spend the rest of my volunteer career with the Red Cross," and "I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected to help the Red Cross be successful." These items also are items in the OIQ. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the commitment items. Means for the items reflect high levels of organizational commitment.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Values	52	3.00	5.00	3.9808	.50450
Willing to stay	52	3.00	5.00	4.2308	.64521
Effort	52	3.00	5.00	4.3462	.59027
Valid N (listwise)	52				

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for organizational commitment items.

Reliability analysis of the commitment items revealed an interesting pattern. Although the three-item scale had acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .70$ ), one element was somewhat lower than the others, as Table 1 also indicates. Specifically, responses

indicated considerable willingness to stay with the organization and work hard; however, the congruence of values, while still high, was lower than the other two variables. In response to research question 3, scores on the OIQ and organizational commitment scales were statistically significantly correlated ( $r = .70, p = .00$ ). It should be noted that the organizational commitment items were components of the larger OIQ, so caution should be used in interpreting this result.

An important corollary of organizational identification noted repeatedly in the literature is job satisfaction (Dorsch et al., 2002). Research has consistently found a statistically significant relationship between scores on organizational identification and on job satisfaction (Becker & Carper, 1956; DeCotiis & Summers, 1987; Russo, 1998). Drawing on these studies, RQ4 asked about the relationship between levels of reported volunteer satisfaction and identification with the American Red Cross. Overall, the study found the respondents to be satisfied with their volunteer experience. Mean scores on the six-item satisfaction scale ranged from 21 to 30, with an overall mean of 24.56 (std = 2.12). Although a strong positive correlation was found between organizational identification and satisfaction with the volunteer job ( $r = .50, p = .000$ ), internal reliability of the scale did not reach acceptable levels (Cronbach's alpha = .52). Standard deviation scores suggest that satisfaction with hours and opportunities had broader ranges with lower bases than scores for other satisfaction components. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for these items, and Table 3 presents bivariate correlations among the items.

	Mean	St. Deviation
Members	4.10	.53
Supervisor	4.12	.68
Work	4.23	.51
Opportunities	4.04	.68
Hours	3.96	.74
Outcomes	4.12	.73

Table 2. Means and standard deviation scores for satisfaction items.

	Members	Supervisor	Work	Opps	Hours	Outcomes
Members		.46**	.35**	.20	.16	.07
Supervisor	.46**		.43**	.06	.01	.33*
Work	.35*	.43**		.54	.57	.00
Opps	.20	.06	.09		.12	-.13
Hours	.16	.01	.57	.12		.05
Outcomes	.07	.33*	.00	-.13	.05	

Table 3. Correlations among satisfaction items.

\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level; \*\* Correlation is significant at the .05 level

The study also revealed no statistically significant difference in reported satisfaction levels ( $F = 1.87, p = .18$ ) depending on whether participants also volunteered for other organizations. To examine whether there were differences in reported satisfaction between volunteers who had full-time jobs and those who did not have the demands of work, an analysis of variance was run. It indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between volunteers with jobs and those without in reported satisfaction ( $F = 3.82, p = .06$ ).

Feeling appreciated by the organization arguably contributes to satisfaction. Dorsch et al. (2002) found that volunteers who feel they have been treated fairly and recognized for their work show higher levels of commitment to the organization. It

was not surprising, then, that scores on items tapping feeling appreciated by other members, feeling appreciated by the Red Cross staff, overall satisfaction, and organizational identification were all statistically significantly correlated, as Table 4 shows.

	Efforts staff	Efforts vols	Satisfaction	Org Identif
Efforts staff		.69**	.62**	.68**
Efforts volunteers	.68**		.76**	.61**
Satisfaction	.65**	.76**		.65**
Org Identif.	.68**	.61**	.65**	

Table 4. Correlations among feeling appreciated by other members, by staff, overall satisfaction, and organizational identification

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In order to investigate more deeply the perceptions of the American Red Cross by its disaster volunteers, for RQ6 participants were asked to provide short answers to the following questions:

- Why do you choose to be a volunteer?
- Why do you choose to volunteer with the Red Cross rather than with another voluntary organization?
- How do you describe to others the work you do for the Red Cross?
- What words of wisdom would you give someone considering volunteering for the American Red Cross?

Volunteers' responses to all questions are quoted verbatim.

An important objective of the open-ended questions was to identify attitudes that may influence volunteers to continue giving their time in service through the Red

Cross rather than another organization. That is, what is it about the Red Cross that volunteers connect with? A careful reading of the 52 responses to these questions revealed a number of organizing themes.

Participants indicated first that the Red Cross provides a vehicle for volunteers to express their humanitarian values, i.e., a concern for the alleviation of human suffering. Second, they noted that being a volunteer fulfills a social need. Third, they reported that being a volunteer enhances self esteem. Finally, their responses indicate that the Red Cross evokes a special loyalty. Results of the thematic analysis are presented in more detail in the following section.

The first and most predominant theme identified is that the Red Cross serves as a means for volunteers to express humanitarian values. Of the 208 responses to the open-ended questions, 86 (41%) included some reference to humanitarian values. Responses to the question, “Why do you choose to be a volunteer?” pointed clearly to the humanitarian motive, with 71 % containing statements expressive of humanitarian values.

Respondents’ values-expressive statements took several forms. Many respondents highlighted helping others. In responding to the item asking “Why do you choose to be a volunteer,” one individual said, “The satisfaction I get in helping others in times of crisis and disaster.” Several other respondents focused on giving back, contributing to society. One said, “I wanted to give something back to the community.” Another wrote, “I am a Cancer survivor therefore I feel that it is my way of giving back.” Still others cited specific personal values. In response to the

question, “Why do you volunteer with the Red Cross rather than with another voluntary organization,” one individual answered, “It does not discriminate in the assistance given.” Another said, “It is open and not tied down to gov. or religious holds” while another wrote, “Re[d] Cross helps people of all kinds and has no political agenda.” Together, these value statements are reflective of the humanitarian ideal of equal treatment and fairness to all. This same ideal, expressed in the guiding principles of the American Red Cross as impartiality is emphasized in disaster volunteer training.

A second theme found in the participants’ responses was that volunteering for the Red Cross fulfills a social need. Ten percent of the responses referenced the social benefits of volunteering, with most responses focused on positive interpersonal relationships and simply staying involved and active. Of those disaster volunteer respondents who mentioned staying active, several indicated the wish to be useful. In response to the question, “Why do you choose to be a volunteer?” one individual wrote, “I have lots of discretionary time available and want to remain actively engaged in the community in a constructive manner.” Another said, “It is a way of using my time to help others in need” while still another answered, “To give something back to the community utilizing my free time after retiring.”

Consistent with the quantitative results indicating the importance of positive relationships with fellow volunteers and paid staff in volunteer satisfaction, several respondents referenced interpersonal relationships in answers to the open-ended questions. In response to the question, “Why do you choose to be a volunteer?” one

individual answered, "I enjoy helping people in need and meeting new Red Cross workers to make new friends." Another respondent answered the question "How do you describe to others the work you do for the Red Cross?" by saying, "One of the greatest things I've been a part of, old people and young people hangin out doing there best to leave wherever they were better than when they got there." In answer to the question, "What words of wisdom would you give someone considering volunteering for the American Red Cross?", one respondent wrote, "Be ready to meet some of the greatest people you will ever meet, just keep an open mind, and don't be afraid to get dirty for someone else." And another said, "Try it you will like it. During a disaster, especially a large one, I have found that Red Cross Volunteers come together as strangers, work and live together as a family, and leave and stay in contact as friends!"

The third theme apparent in the volunteers' responses is that the volunteer experience enhances self-esteem. The responses supporting this theme fall into two categories: feelings of pride from being associated with a respected organization and individual feelings of appreciation. One individual answered the question, "Why do you choose to be a volunteer?" by writing, "Because of the very positive reputation the Red Cross has in the US Army where I spent 33 years." In explaining why they "choose to volunteer with the Red Cross rather than with another voluntary organization," one individual wrote "reputation and always there when needed." In answer to the question, "How do you describe to others the work you do for the Red Cross, one respondent answered, "I describe my work with the red cross with pride."



Other respondents focused on feeling appreciated. One individual answered the question, “Why do you choose to be a volunteer?” by writing, “It is satisfying and rewarding to experience the appreciation expressed by those helped during time(s) of need/disaster.” When asked “What words of wisdom would you give someone considering volunteering for the American Red Cross?” another individual wrote, “Take the opportunity to do something good for yourself as well as helping those who need it. The feeling of being there for someone who really needs it can’t be expressed.” Another said, “It takes great commitment but the self worth you feel afterwards makes it a valuable experience.”

The fourth theme that emerged from the volunteers’ responses suggests that the Red Cross evokes a special loyalty. Responses indicated an appreciation for the organization’s structure and policies as well as its history of service. In answering the question, “Why do you choose to volunteer with the Red Cross rather than with another voluntary organization?” one individual said, “I have found their administrative structure and accountability to the volunteers to be very conducive to trustful confidence and comradery.” Another said simply, “. . . I like the structure of the Red Cross.” while another wrote, “The Red Cross has an excellent reputation and a well organized operation. I always feel that I have back up from knowledgeable people from both paid and unpaid volunteers. Training is excellent.”

Other respondents pointed to an historical relationship with the organization as influencing their decision to volunteer with the Red Cross rather than with another voluntary organization. One individual wrote, “My mother was a volunteer Red Cross

nurse during WWII. I was a volunteer Rescue Squad member in the 60's." Another said, "Red Cross was there for some family members when it was needed and that was the most trying time in the family's life. They did what they said they would try to do and they did!" Still another said, ". . . my mother who has passed volunteer with the Red Cross blood drive for years." Another woman said simply, "I've always wanted to [volunteer for the Red Cross] since I was a little girl."

Repeated readings of the respondents' words suggested the presence of underlying messages that may be active in motivating individuals to volunteer. To gain a deeper understanding of the internal voices that may influence volunteers' decision to give their time in service to the American Red Cross, the study sought to identify memorable messages embedded in the respondents' words (RQ6). As stated earlier, a significant proportion of the responses to the open-ended questions (71%) made reference to humanitarian values as influencing the decision to volunteer, specifically "helping others." One individual explained his reason for volunteering saying, "I choose to help the less fortunate and those in disaster situations." Many respondents paired the desire to "help others" with the reward of "personal satisfaction." Still others paired "helping others" with the hope that, should they ever be in need, they would be helped in return, "I feel that if I help now in my time of need someone will be there for me," and "To help people in need and to learn as one never knows when we might have a disaster ourselves." In these words it is easy to hear a clear echo of the Golden Rule. As one individual said, "it is nothing new I was taught to give back as a youngster."

In summary, four themes emerged from the respondents' comments about their volunteer role. By far the strongest theme centered on the Red Cross' ability to provide experiences that enable volunteers to express their humanitarian values. For many individuals, these values, like helping others and giving back to the community are articulations of memorable messages communicated by family and society beginning in childhood. A second theme suggests that the personal relationships volunteers form with one another and with paid staff fulfill a social need. In addition, through their association with an organization that enjoys a positive reputation and high level of public trust, these disaster volunteers experience enhanced self-esteem. Finally, the responses point to a fourth theme suggesting that particular characteristics of the American Red Cross elicit a special loyalty to the organization per se.

#### Discussion

The study examined factors that may influence individuals to join the Red Cross as disaster volunteers and to continue in service with the organization. Research questions focused on organizational identification (OI), examining the effect on OI of volunteers' experience on local or national disaster assignments and whether they also volunteered for other organizations. Research questions also examined the relationship between identification and commitment and between identification and satisfaction with the organization. Also investigated was how volunteers' feelings of being appreciated by other organizational members affected identification and satisfaction levels. Finally, one research question was designed to

elicit themes and memorable messages to further clarify why these volunteers were attracted to the Red Cross and why they continue in service.

Unsurprisingly, OI/OC and satisfaction were highly correlated and related to one another as in other contexts. The study found high levels of organizational identification among this group of disaster volunteers. As expected, commitment and identification with the organization were strongly and positively related. However, contrary to research suggesting that more frequent exposures to the organization serve to strengthen identification (Dutton et al. 1994), neither the number of disaster assignments nor the visibility of the work (national disaster vs. local disaster) appeared to be a factor in strengthening identification for these volunteers. Moreover, there was no significant difference in identification between those volunteers who work exclusively with the Red Cross and those who also volunteer with other organizations.

Strong support was found for earlier work suggesting that volunteer commitment is an outgrowth of satisfaction with the job experience (Dorsch et al., 2002) and in particular with the organization's policies and procedures (Steers, 1977). The volunteer participants not only reported high levels of satisfaction with their duties but also specifically mentioned the organization's structure, training requirements, and service delivery policies in their personal comments.

Consistent with the findings of Steers (1997) indicating that strongly identified volunteers are more likely to embrace the organization's goals as their own, volunteers surveyed often used "we" statements in reference to their work, "We help

people in crisis and need, regardless of nationality, religion or combatant status.”

Indeed, such statements illustrate the cognitive connection described by Dutton et al. (1994) where individuals perceive in the organization the same attributes they perceive in themselves.

The frequent mention of Red Cross humanitarian values, notably “helping others” and impartiality in service delivery would suggest that, consistent with Cheney (1983), the volunteers surveyed have found deeper meaning in their lives, and perhaps enhanced self-esteem, through their volunteer activities. Moreover, the volunteers’ repeated references to “helping others” would indicate that they believe they are making a positive difference in people’s lives are, therefore, far less likely to separate from the organization (Wilson & Musick, 1999).

Results from this study are consistent with research on “mattering.” Mattering to others is recognized as the fundamental need that all individuals have to feel significant and important to other people in their lives (Dixon Rayle, 2006b; Elliott, Kao, & Grant, 2004; Rosenberg, 1985). It is considered to be a global construct of significance through which individuals perceive their relevance in relation to specific others such as people in general, family members, friends, or to society at large (Schieman & Taylor, 2001). Red Cross volunteers’ comments about their connection to the organization and its work clearly reflects how mattering draws them in.

Also identified in Wilson and Musick’s (1999) work and confirmed in this study was the importance of social relationships in influencing volunteers’ attachment to the organization. The prospect of making new friends was found to be an important

factor in attracting volunteers to the Red Cross. Furthermore, volunteers' satisfaction with the organization was found to be related to the positive relationships they enjoyed with Red Cross colleagues. Consistent with the findings of Wilson and Musick (1999), the prospect of losing those relationships by leaving the volunteer corps would likely exact a high social cost on the individual.

*Strengths, weaknesses, and future directions for research*

The strength of this study lies in its participants, a set of current volunteers associated with a specific voluntary organization. In addition, the relationship between the researcher and the organization offered this unique opportunity to pose questions that have not been asked before. However, because of the special nature of disaster work, in particular the extraordinary demands placed on volunteers in terms of training, time, and the emotional intensity of working directly with disaster victims, it is unclear whether the results of this study are applicable to the broader voluntary community. Indeed, it would be revealing to compare the current data with data from other Red Cross volunteer groups, for example, blood drive workers.

While the study found support for earlier work in the areas of volunteer commitment and identification, its findings are limited by a clerical error that caused the omission of age and gender data. Although, due to the unpredictable hours and length of national disaster assignments, many volunteers are retired from the workforce, an analysis of factors that motivate volunteers of different generations could offer important data for more effective volunteer recruitment and retention messages. Similarly, although the two volunteer groups invited to participate in this

study are approximately 60% female and 40% male, it would be important in future studies to be able to evaluate the data according to gender.

Although the personal comments of the volunteers in this study confirmed earlier work on volunteer identification and commitment, it only began to answer the question of what it is about the Red Cross that attracts and retains volunteers. Using these responses as a starting point, personal interviews or focus groups could be used in future studies to probe more deeply and add detail to the current results. In particular, what contributes to volunteers' feelings of being appreciated? What sorts of recognition work? Is the source of the appreciation important? What kinds of recognition fail – and what is the result in terms of volunteer retention?

Similarly, the importance of being able to express their humanitarian values through volunteer work evokes the question of what happens if volunteers feel the organization has failed to live up to its values. Missing from this study are the voices of individuals who either chose not to participate in the survey or who could not be contacted because they had terminated their volunteer position. Future study could compare data from volunteers who left the organization with data from this study, perhaps with a focus on disillusionment and exit.

This study attempted to identify factors that may attract volunteers to an organization and influence them to stay. In particular, the study focused on the American Red Cross, a humanitarian service organization, and a group of disaster volunteers, those most responsible for the front line delivery of humanitarian service. Unsurprisingly, this group of unpaid workers who regularly sacrifice personal

comfort to be in service to others was shown to have high levels of commitment and identification with the organization on OI/OC scales. It was through their own words, however, that the volunteers revealed the source of that commitment to be in the organization's humanitarian mission and in their personal relationships with colleagues.

Not-for-profit organizations that depend on volunteers should understand that it is their mission, and their faithfulness to that mission, that calls individuals and keeps them involved. The organization that empowers volunteers to be active participants in fulfilling the mission and demonstrates its appreciation for volunteers' service should be able to attract and retain a loyal corps of volunteer workers.



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