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WHY DO WE CARE ABOUT VOLUNTEERS and the voluntary sector? Many reasons are possible: volunteers potentially offer free labor, convivial sociability, and a selfless spirit of altruism. Volunteering can provide a healthful distraction for potentially delinquent youth, job training for the unemployed, or professional training toward a career. Volunteers can propagate cultural identities, form recreational clubs, fight for vast social change, and win small victories for their neighborhoods. When volunteer settings give people a chance to learn how to make decisions together and think about the bigger social picture, they can operate like small schools of democracy. The everyday experience of volunteering can embody any of these values.

All of them are worthwhile. Many nonprofits try to make them all happen at once. But not all volunteers do all these things, and none can do them all at the same moment (Eliasoph 2016; Garrow and Hasenfeld 2014; Mosley 2012).

This chapter's goal is to clear away some seemingly obvious but misleading ideas about volunteering. In common sense, as well as much scholarship, what is good about volunteering is, unsurprisingly, based on . . . its voluntariness! But what if the focus on voluntariness distracts us from focusing on whatever it is that we really value in volunteering? I argue that when we assume that voluntariness is the defining feature, we are using voluntariness as a vague placeholder for something we value. It might be anything on the preceding list or something else, but if you want to study nonprofit volunteers, it makes more sense to focus on whatever you actually value about volunteering than to rely on voluntariness as a vague placeholder.

The bulk of the chapter discusses and problematizes three common ways of distinguishing volunteering from other kinds of activities: the presence or absence of state coercion, payment, and customary moral obligation. I show that these three common definitions obscure much of the reason we care about volunteering: its ability to provide a range of social goods that we often lump together and gloss with the label *volunteering*. I then make the case for shifting our focus from voluntariness to whichever social goods the person who is examining volunteer work actually cares about, be they providing needed free labor, creating schools for democracy, or something else. I offer five examples

of alternative focuses that can help researchers more clearly see how volunteers pursue social goods, both in everyday interaction with one another in nonprofits and also within larger economic, political, and cultural structures. In the end, I argue that although distinguishing volunteering from other kinds of work is not easy, the borders between the voluntary sector and other sectors are often where the most interesting action takes place (Alexander 2006).

What Is Volunteering? Work Without State Coercion, Customary Obligation, or Pay?

Crossnational surveys of volunteering require precise definitions of “the nonprofit volunteer,” but their precision cannot fix a nagging empirical problem. To begin with, the boundaries between *nonprofit* and other things, and between *volunteer* and other things, are porous. In addition, naming itself does a lot of work for whoever is doing the naming: boundaries are often in the eyes of the beholders, and beholders often argue about what counts as “real” volunteering in a “real” nonprofit. Internally, many volunteers question their own motives. This chapter argues that for some kinds of research, it makes more sense to ask why you, or whoever is doing the naming, wanted to name someone a volunteer and why you or they care about nonprofit volunteering.

Others in this volume have already discussed the important question of how to define *nonprofit* (Bromley, Chapter 4, “The Organizational Transformation of Civil Society”; Powell, Chapter 1, “What Is the Nonprofit Sector?”). I will only note in passing that according to its most influential, formal, legal definition, the nonprofit sector includes Greenpeace, the National Hot Rod Association, the Emily Dickinson International Society, the Moose Club, many of the world’s soup kitchens and ballet studios, the parent association at your local elementary school, and most American hospitals and museums (but not most French hospitals or museums, since they are almost all state-sponsored). Some are hundred-year-old, giant, international NGOs with directors and recipients of aid on opposite sides of the globe; others are tiny, local groups whose ten members all see each other weekly for a year before the group folds.

The usual approach to defining the nonprofit sector (also called the third sector, voluntary sector, or civic sphere) is to define it by what it is not: nonstate, nonmarket, and nonfamily (e.g., Wolfe 1989). Often, scholars name each sector and assume that action inside it fits the sector’s boundaries the way wine fits into a bottle. The problem is that the action may not conform to the bottle’s shape; the action can change the bottle’s shape, if volunteers challenge their own position in relation to the state or the market, for example. And the bottles are scrambled together in the first place, since many nonprofits blend funding from nonprofits, governments, private individual donors, foundations, and corporations, and since “the nonprofit” exists only because governments have made nonprofits possible.

Defining “the volunteer” is just as hard as defining “the nonprofit.” On the one hand, many people who are called volunteers do not feel like volunteers. They often feel compelled by the market, or by the state, or by custom. Some people volunteer because they must plump up a résumé to show future college admissions offices and potential employers that they are good, caring, selfless people (Handy et al. 2010; Eliasoph 2011, Bonetti

and Riccardo 2015). Many have to work for free in their chosen field so that they can eventually get a job in it (Swidler and Watkins 2009). Many have to do volunteer work to pass a college class. Some are called “volunteers” but are paid—such as Peace Corps and AmeriCorps volunteers, who get paid enough for a person from a wealthy nation to live on (which would seem like a fortune for someone from most of the world). And what about the millions of American teens who do volunteer work because “community service” is a graduation requirement in their high schools (Wilson 2012)? What about employees who go to a protest that their company “suggests” they should attend and who may fear that if they do not attend, they will get fired or their jobs will move to another country (Walker 2014)? What about job trainees who have to do volunteer work to get welfare benefits? Do they all count as volunteers?

On the other hand, many people who do not get called volunteers, such as paid social workers, work long hours after work for free, taking care of the same people they serve at work. Are they *not* volunteers before 5:00 p.m., but volunteers after 5:00, even if they are doing the same thing they did from 9:00 to 5:00? What about people who live in villages in which it is customary to pitch in to help repair roads every spring, without pay, when these villagers know that if they don’t pitch in, they’ll be socially ostracized (Helander and Sundback 1998)?

In the end, defining nonprofit volunteering by its voluntariness may be missing the point: what matters is *why you care* about separating out nonprofit volunteers’ activities from other activities. If the main reason that you care about volunteers is that they provide beneficial goods and services, then you should count the number of hours volunteers contribute to a nation per year and find a way to measure volunteers’ skills at providing those goods and services, so you can measure the voluntary sector’s contribution, perhaps counting it as hidden labor, that measures of the GDP should take into account (e.g., Salamon et al. 2003). If you care about increasing volunteers’ chances for upward mobility and self-improvement, measure that. If you care about the voluntary sector because you have an idea of volunteering’s unique contribution to democracy, then you should examine volunteering in ways that highlight this particular social good.

Formulating the question this way follows the “pragmatist” logic that John Dewey describes in an essay on the logic of scientific inquiry (1920:153): if you are evaluating a cherry orchard, you implicitly have a “for what?” in mind. If you want to harvest the fruit, your question is “How sweet are the cherries?” If you want to build cabinets, your question is “How many feet of good timber?” If you are kids interested in climbing trees, you wonder how solid each limb is. If you are teenagers looking for a secret place to kiss, you look for shady spots to hide under the boughs.

One good way to see a word’s definition, in everyday usage, is to ask “as opposed to what?” Sometimes, people talk as if the opposite of *voluntary* is *coerced by the state*. Others implicitly define *voluntary* as the opposite of *paid*. According to this definition, working for money is implicitly another form of coerced labor, in addition to state coercion. The cultural power of this definition is why a nonprofit has to include some volunteers, as opposed to including only paid employees: not being paid makes their work seem more voluntary.

A third typical opposite of *voluntary* is *unquestioned*, like the customary mutual aid that people in precapitalist societies consider simply natural and normal and that still is

in play in some places (Kropotkin [1892] 2006). It has its own kind of coercive power that comes from custom. In many touching studies of the transition to industrial capitalism in England, E. P. Thompson (1969) showed that when helping neighbors was not optional but was socially required, making a profit when others were in need was called *usury* and was considered a sin. Tocqueville implicitly adopts this definition of volunteering as the opposite of *natural and unquestioned* in *Democracy in America*. “Aristocracy links everyone in one long chain from peasant to king,” he says. When democracy comes along, it “breaks the chain and frees each link” ([1835] 1969:508); as a result, feelings of solidarity are “reduced almost to nothing in democratic countries; they must therefore be *artificially created*, and only associations can do that” (515; italics added). To fit this definition, nonprofit volunteers should be joining on purpose, not just simply because they are bowing to an unquestioned moral order.

So now we have three possible definitions of volunteering: one that opposes it to government coercion, one that opposes it to market coercion, and one that opposes it to unquestioned moral obligation. But all three of these definitions present us with a challenge when we try to locate its defining feature: locating government coercion is hard; locating market coercion is hard; and distinguishing between customary, unquestioned moral obligations and voluntary ones also is hard. And once we do locate these different kinds of coercion, we see that they may or may not matter, or may matter differently, for the social action that made us care so much about volunteering in the first place.

Coerced or Controlled Versus Autonomous

According to our first common definition, nonprofit volunteering should be neither imposed nor politically controlled by the state. A usual illustration of state coercion is the Soviet-era’s mandatory, so-called voluntary, unpaid Saturday work brigades, the *subbotniki*, in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But the *subbotniki* present us with a puzzle: however coerced that volunteering was, it also provided the workers with many of the traditional benefits of volunteering. Many participants relished working shoulder-to-shoulder for the common good, cleaning parks, planting trees, and repairing shared buildings. Many Russians have been pining for those work brigades since the Soviet Union collapsed; they mourn that after that collapse, everyone had to start competing all the time (Clément 2015, 2017). The collapse of the stifling but secure and sociable Soviet order was followed by decades of chaos, enforced competition, emotional isolation, and lack of solidarity. Interviewees waxed nostalgic about the feeling of togetherness, shared work for the common good, and sociability that the *subbotniki* provided. This is the point: if the main value you hope to find in volunteering is the feeling of togetherness it produces, or if you value it because it’s providing useful labor for the good of all, and if you are not focusing on whether the volunteering can easily become a school for democracy, then it does not matter if volunteering is government-controlled.

Even if a “school for democracy” is indeed a big part of what makes you care about volunteering, there is still a reason to doubt that volunteering that is sponsored by the state will be different from volunteering that is not. The sponsorship may not matter, because even in organizations that are completely state initiated and funded, the state may not exert control. The issue is about control, not sponsorship or funding. How do we know if the state is controlling the nonprofit volunteers? In some cases, it’s fairly easy to

tell. Many Chinese NGOs are not just funded by the government but also organized and strictly controlled by the government. These nonprofits are called, with only a small bit of sarcasm, GONGOs: government-organized non-government organizations. Volunteers in these GONGOs cannot easily oppose the government about issues such as human rights, labor, or environmental planning. They can help the government provide beneficial services, such as caregiving, but they can't easily question the government's policies (Xu 2017; Spires 2011). In France, in contrast, where about 43 percent of associations get government funding, even NGOs that openly defy the government get funding. So if the main reason you care about volunteering is its potential to be a "school of democracy," then the Chinese NGOs would not count but the French ones would. By contrast, if you're interested in the free labor that volunteers contribute to society or the feelings of fellowship that volunteering can produce, then both the French and the Chinese NGOs could count.

Figuring out what to count as government control is even harder than this example makes it look. If, as in some NGOs in authoritarian countries, volunteers clearly express an opinion or idea and the government explicitly prevents them from publicizing the opinion or acting on the idea, then the government is controlling the group. That is clear enough. But what if volunteers *preemptively* silence themselves? Many studies (Clément 2017; Eliasoph 1998; Gaventa 1980; Hamidi 2010; Norgaard 2011; Elsayed 2018; Talpin 2011; Luhtakallio 2012; Hustinx and De Waele 2015; among others) find volunteers silencing *themselves*, even without being aware of doing so, and without consciously noticing much state control. If they do so because they know they are powerless, fear that they are powerless, or firmly expect to be silenced, then how do we decide whether subtle forms of state control are in play?

If control is the issue, then it would be up to the researcher to decide whether those volunteers' fears and expectations were correct. This is the implicit logic behind various large-scale measures of democracy, such as the Varieties of Democracy database (Varieties of Democracy Project 2018): by examining laws, political parties, elections, social conditions, and over a hundred other variables, researchers should, in theory, be able to demonstrate how realistic the fears would be. If the fears are realistic, then the volunteers are under state control; if the researcher deems any fears unrealistic but the volunteers sound like they have no political concerns anyway, then the researcher would have to assume that the volunteers don't care about politics. In principal, a researcher could spend a lot of time with volunteers to see if they are actively narrowing their circle of concern because they assume that caring about politics would be futile or dangerous. But that would require watching the volunteers interact with each other in various settings over time and would require a great deal of interpretive work.

In my own ethnographic research (Eliasoph 1998), I heard school volunteers, while speaking in their group, avoiding questions that occasional visitors and newcomers brought to the group about the lack of government funding that caused their kids' school's roof to cave in, lack of money for computers, environmental problems, racism in the school, and other potentially "political" issues. The volunteers tried to avoid having to treat anything as a political issue. Instead, the long-term, loyal volunteers devoted lavish attention to topics such as building the throne for the homecoming queen, raising funds for the school, or their proud acquisition of the Royal Dog Steamer, which could roast twenty hot dogs at a

time at school sports events, including Polish dogs, brats, wieners, foot-long, and more! But the same volunteers who avoided politics in the group meetings revealed concern about these same issues when they were talking to each other in other situations, outside their group meetings. In their meetings, they tried only to talk about what they felt they could realistically do, often congratulating each other for being so effective at fund-raising and doing the tasks they set for themselves. When newcomers brought up conflict, funding, and more seemingly distant political issues, the long-standing volunteers ignored them, to focus with glee on the logistics of what they assumed that they could realistically do. Focusing on what they assumed they could not fix would have undermined their upbeat, can-do spirit.

Political scientist Camille Hamidi heard something similar in an NGO for minority youth in France. When speaking with the youth volunteers about their job-hunting woes, even the paid adult organizers who were members of the radical Green Party avoided making the connection between the misery of job-hunting and broader political issues. When speaking to members of the minority youth group, the organizers wanted to encourage the kids to try hard and have a can-do spirit and not to focus on long-term problems of anti-Muslim discrimination and structural unemployment that they could not immediately fix. But in other contexts, the same organizers indignantly decried the discrimination immigrant youth faced, and capitalism in general (Hamidi 2010).

If volunteers explicitly say that they don't care about big political problems and that they're freely choosing only to focus on what they can do realistically, which to them includes figuring out how to use the Royal Dog Steamer but does not include pressuring the government to fix the school's roof, then it can look as if the group is not controlled. In this and many other ways, it is often hard to distinguish between government control and its absence, even within one person, even within one's own self.

Unquestioned and Customary Versus Optional

If what you value in volunteering is volunteers' consciously, freely choosing to band together, then you might focus on the distinction between work that is unquestioned versus work that is optional. Consciously choosing to work together, as in Tocqueville's "artificially created" associations, means recognizing that what you are doing is not simply natural or God-given but rather something that ordinary humans have made and can control. This distinction presents a big puzzle for cross-national surveys of the voluntary sector. In many rural Finnish villages, for example, residents would be socially ostracized if they didn't take part in road building, barn raisings, or other shared activities like America's "quilting bees" of yore. In these Finnish "bees," like the many forms of mutual aid in most precapitalist societies (Kropotkin [1892] 2006), sharing does not feel like a choice. It seems simply natural, and if some quirky outlier in the village does not experience it as natural, then social acceptance demands participation anyway (Helander and Sundback 1998:18). This puzzle about how voluntary a shared activity has to be to count as volunteering also appears in debates about whether to include religious volunteering as truly voluntary, or whether this is even the right question (Tugal 2017). Identifying volunteering by looking for action that isn't mandated by custom has another problem: the sharp distinction between "inside" and "outside" is, itself, a modernist, Western concept in the first place (Elias [1939] 1982; Tugal 2017). For much of history, distinguishing private, inner feelings

from social obligation was hard, if not impossible; some languages have neither the word nor the concept for that interior world of private, unspoken intentions (Rosaldo 1982).

Distinguishing obligatory obligation from voluntary obligation is not easy—not in one's own mind, and much less in someone else's. As many nations dismantle their welfare services, making volunteers do the work that paid social service providers once did to care for elders, disabled people, and youth (Smith and Lipsky 1993; Lichterman 2005; Eliasoph 2011), many studies describe volunteers' feelings waffling, moment by moment, as they ask themselves, "Am I voluntarily serving? If I am a decent, moral being, do I have a choice? What if my volunteering is ineffective because the state and its paid professionals *should* do this work?"

In *The Moral Neoliberal*, for example, Italian volunteers and employees of charity nonprofits say in some moments that they feel glad to help, grateful that they can serve humbly, and filled with mercy and lovingkindness. They really *hope to feel* that they don't have a choice, not because they're coerced, but because they *want* to feel, "This is who I am, I can do no other."

On the other hand, the same volunteers and employees sometimes speak of despair, resentment, and righteous indignation over the impossibly large task of making volunteers provide services that volunteers cannot realistically provide and that they wish the state would provide (Muelebach 2012; Verhoeven and Tonkens 2013; Grootegoed 2013; Grootegoed, Bröer, and Duyvendak 2013). Although they want to feel like the kind of person who freely helps, they also see that they often cannot realistically help the people they aim to help, and they resent being set up for failure. They can see that real help would be too time-consuming or expensive for volunteers to do, or would require too much expertise for volunteers to provide, and that the state needs to provide the service. To summarize their complex internal dialogues as "volunteering" would miss this mixture of wishing to be helpful, trying to avoid feeling helpless, and indignantly thinking that they are doing a job that the state should do.

Paid Versus Unpaid

Just as it is hard to see whether control is coming from the state, so is it also often hard to know whether control is coming mainly from a profit-making company. If you Google almost any corporation and add the word *volunteer* or *civic*, you'll find a web page that describes the company's volunteer projects. ExxonMobil, BP, Georgia-Pacific—many do it (Shachar and Hustinx 2019). Usually, they organize apolitical projects. BP, for example, asked employees in 2011 to donate old business-formal dresses to female job seekers and to clean up beaches (though not the same beaches that their company had destroyed in a massive oil spill the year before).

Some corporations go further toward politics by enlisting "volunteer" employees to picket on behalf of a cause that will benefit the corporation (Stauber and Rampton 1996; Walker 2014). Some corporations coerce volunteers; employees who do not contribute risk being fired. Other companies do not coerce so directly. In those cases, it's hard to draw a line between freedom and market-based coercion, because companies can threaten not just to fire the specific individuals who do not "voluntarily" go to city hall to defend the company but also to shut down whole industries and move away. In the 1990s, for

example, timber companies threatened to move to other countries to avoid environmental regulation, and the companies lavishly funded campaigns to convince some loggers in the Pacific Northwest that clear-cutting forests was the only way for the loggers to avoid unemployment. As a result, some loggers joined their employers to fight against environmental regulation (Stauber and Rampton 1996). Theoretically, it could be possible to decide what the balance was between coercion and persuasion here, but as in the question of “government control,” the researcher would need to do a great deal of interpretive work to locate this balance. Theories of political conversation would guide us to listen to the volunteers’ backstage jokes, songs, complaints, and whispers, to see if the volunteers resisted the corporation’s way of bringing the market and voluntary sector together (e.g., Scott 1990; Bayat 2010; Eliasoph 1998).¹

Money matters here—more than it should if it’s purely part of “the voluntary sector.” The timber industry induced loggers to picket on its behalf not only by threatening them with individual firings and mass layoffs but also by winning them over ideologically, and that victory depended, in part, on the timber industry’s having more money than the environmentalists had to spend on funding ad campaigns; scientific research to highlight logging’s benefits for flora, fauna, and waterways; social groups and meetings; lobbyists; market research to figure out how to sell its ideas to voters; and other ways of spreading ideas and influencing policy. The organizers that corporations hire to plan their volunteering efforts often invoke multiple, competing justifications of their work (Shachar et al. 2016), so it makes sense that the volunteers would, too.

There’s yet another problem if *voluntary* means *unpaid*: often, the substantive distinction between paid and unpaid staff can be insignificant. Many social service workers’ dizzy careers career between sectors as fast as the grants appear and disappear. A volunteer might quickly move to a paid job in which she works eighty hours a week while being paid for only forty, then to a paid position in another nonprofit while volunteering in a third nonprofit, and then to a city-funded job that feels nearly identical to the job in the nonprofit, round and round, with not much difference in the work, and within all the same social networks (Hamidi 2010; Eliasoph 2011; Swidler and Watkins 2009). John Krinsky and Maud Simonet (2016) portray a New York City parks manager who has a two-faced business card: on one side, he is an administrator with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation; his name is displayed with the Parks Department logo and a .gov address. On the card’s other side, he is an executive director of a nonprofit parks conservancy; his name is displayed with the nonprofit’s logo and a .org address. So would we say that some hours of the day, he’s under government control, and others, he’s in the nonprofit sector? The same confusion might hit the job trainee who works under him, mandated by a welfare agency to clean parks. The job trainees are sometimes called volunteers. Are they volunteers for a city agency or a nonprofit? Since their volunteer work allows them access to needed welfare benefits, should we not consider it paid labor? Like the directors, the job trainee may have difficulty deciding which half of herself is in play at any particular moment.

The distinction between paid and unpaid presents still another puzzle: even if volunteers are not getting paid, often someone else is getting paid a lot because of their work. For example, when state or nonprofit volunteers replaced many of the unionized city

employees who used to maintain New York City's parks, the nonprofit sector grew at the expense of the unionized, municipal government sector. When they beautify parks, these unpaid workers become part of a city's real estate speculation, fueling a growth machine that sometimes increases rents to the point that they get squeezed out of their own homes (McQuarrie 2011). The volunteers are inadvertently generating profits for landlords and real estate speculators, so, by some definitions, they are "workers" in a citywide, profit-making enterprise: they are generating profits. Volunteers and their labor are not separate from the market system—they're an important part of it.

To Study Mixed Motives, Don't Try to Unscramble Them

If what makes people nonprofit volunteers hinges on whether they're controlled by the market or the state or an unquestioned moral order, we have a general problem: usually, the volunteer has many motives at once. Volunteers often internally interrogate themselves about their own motives (see also Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003 and Eliasoph 2011 on this self-questioning). And as Femida Handy and her colleagues (2010) observe, somewhat in passing, when teen volunteers tell an interviewer that they're motivated by altruism, they may just be saying what they guess is the right thing to tell an interviewer. Nonprofit volunteers often argue with one another about which motive is really in play. Helping others is supposed to be an avenue for self-improvement and morally uplifting for the volunteer. It's also often supposed to help the volunteer test out a career and learn job skills. Volunteering is supposed to be good for one's health, preventing colds, heart attacks, and mental illness. If a volunteer experiences the activity as a choice in some moments of the day but not others, should we check the box marked voluntary, half voluntary, or not voluntary? Figuring out what to count as voluntary could require peering deep into actors' souls and imagining that there, in the deepest place within, the actor actually *can* distinguish between voluntary and involuntary.

But when we listen to volunteers talk about their motivations, we should expect to find layers upon layers upon layers of feelings, hopes about feelings, and fears about feelings. The Italian volunteers *hope to feel* that they have no choice because their integrity demands that they act; while they also secretly suspect that they might just leave at any moment to do something more rewarding; while they also see that as volunteers, they cannot do their job well; while they also resent the state for offloading an impossible job onto volunteers. In other studies, volunteers express internal doubts, worrying that they're just volunteering as a way to stuff their résumé for selfishly instrumental purposes in the face of grave social problems—asking oppressed people to "pimp their poverty" so privileged people can get grants and lines on their résumés (Eliasoph 2011). Among all these internal suspicions, hopes, fears, and other feelings *about* feelings, which would the researcher take the most seriously?

Similar layers of feelings, and feeling about feelings, appear in many ethnographies. To take another example from my own work: when a teen civic engagement project in the American Midwest got money to do volunteer projects, the disadvantaged teens in the group suggested having parties for themselves, since giving teens like them (who knew they were in prevention programs for at-risk youth) something to do that would be good for society. The teens who were *not* disadvantaged disagreed, saying that the group

members were not the problem; they were supposed to be fixing other people's problems (Eliasoph 2011). But those same nondisadvantaged teens who thought that they were volunteering to fix other people's problems secretly suspected one another and themselves of just wanting to fluff up their résumés so they could brag about how caring they are on college applications.

Similarly, when disadvantaged French teens went to refurbish a hospital in Madagascar, they were ostensibly going to help others, but the organizers considered the trip to be also, or mainly, an educational project for the volunteers, and some volunteers accused others of treating it more as a vacation than a work brigade (Hamidi 2010). As Laura K. Gee and Jonathan Meer argued in this volume's previous chapter, if our understanding of volunteering (donating time) to a nonprofit depends on our assessment of how altruistic the volunteers' motives truly are, we get lost in an endless series of questions about what constitutes true altruism.

Some researchers try to get around these questions by focusing not on volunteers' motives but on who benefits from their work: are their actions "member benefiting" or "other benefiting"? The idea is that although both a soccer club and a free clinic rely on volunteers, the soccer club doesn't aim to help others whereas the clinic does. The problem with this distinction is that many nonprofits explicitly aim to do both, like the Midwestern teen civic engagement groups and the French group that went to Madagascar. To help others *is* to help yourself, in this approach.

Microlending programs blend self-help and help of others in yet another way. In one study of microlending in rural India (Sanyal 2014), the female recipients do everything that a Tocquevillean would hope: they develop fellow feeling, they learn to organize a group, and they develop a bit of social awareness. They do everything except the main thing that the microlending organization promises: make money. So they are helping themselves but not the way the program promises. When the World Bank promotes volunteering worldwide, in the interests of promoting economic development, do similar tangles arise, or different ones (World Bank 2012)? Seeing how the various missions tangle is more useful than trying to untangle them.

When We Don't Spotlight Voluntariness, What Else Comes to Light?

Focusing on voluntariness blinds the researcher to some of the most important differences between ordinary citizens' engagements. Furthermore, it may not be possible to distinguish between volunteering and not volunteering. Where does that leave researchers? I offer five ways of focusing research on volunteering differently.

First, as I suggested earlier, researchers can focus on what it is they value about volunteer: civic action, democratic participation, social solidarity and a spirit of connection, or whatever other social good that they habitually use the convenient and ennobling but distracting label *volunteering* to signal. Shifting the spotlight this way can open up new questions about how paid or unpaid, coerced or uncoerced, controlled or uncontrolled volunteers are creating that particular social good.

Second, scholars of volunteering might highlight institutional control itself and identifying its consequences. These scholars might borrow from John Gaventa's (1980) study of Appalachian miners. In this study, institutional control of the miners became most

visible when it came to an end. Miners who were members of a corrupt, undemocratically run union in the 1970s initially insisted to an interviewer that they did not care a bit about politics. They professed utter apathy . . . *until* they got a “democratic union” that gave union members real voice (Gaventa 1980). Soon, their apathy started to vanish! They started becoming eager not just to participate in the union but also, remarkably, to vote, talk about politics, watch the news, have meetings, and pay attention to politics in all sorts of new ways. Now that they assumed they could do something about political problems, they said they *did* care about politics. They became eager to challenge the mining company’s power and to name it as coercive and unjust. The union had changed its way of connecting its own action to market and state action. The political scope of miners’ conversations widened.

Likewise, researchers may gain new insight into the nature of volunteering when there is a shift in the institutional forces that contextualize it and give it meaning. What happened, for example, when local associations became legal in Russia (Zhuravlev, Yerpyleva, and Saveleva 2017)? What happened when they become illegal in Egypt (Elsayed 2018)? Then the “volunteers” begin either doing something new or giving new meanings to old activities.

Third, scholars of volunteering might shine their intellectual beams on nonprofits’ interactional styles, asking how, or whether, the organization’s habitual styles foster the social good the researcher cares about (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014). For example, consider three organizations organized to help immigrants and refugees in Denmark. The first, Friendly Danes, tries to convince citizens that immigrants and refugees are decent, nondangerous people and that citizens should make immigrants and refugees feel welcome and at home. A second helps individual refugees or families, one at a time, with things like finding housing and processing citizenship papers. And a third fights the laws that make immigration so dangerous (Toubøl 2017; Carlsen 2019; see Ramirez 2016, for a similar pattern in the United States). Internally, each group has a different interactional style. For example, in the third, talking about social conflict is required, but in the first, it’s taboo—Friendly Danes just wanted to be friendly and welcoming and not highlight conflict. As in these examples, interactional styles can highlight or downplay conflict; they can also encourage long-term or short-term social bonds, encourage or discourage discussions of systemic social change, and encourage group members to speak for the vast majority or for a segment of the population. This constellation of factors composes a group style. Some styles are better for enlisting volunteers at providing free labor; other styles are more likely to become schools for democracy, and others provide other goods.

By focusing on a group’s interactional style, researchers can see how a group collectively imagines volunteering in relation to the various forms of coercion I have described. In doing so, the group is shaping the market, the state, and the customary moral order, as well as other institutionalized spheres, in relation to one another. Different societies have different laws and historically solid ways of balancing the market, the state, the voluntary sector, religion, and other spheres. These laws and histories are powerful, but there is also always some motion, partly generated by actors themselves, maintaining or transforming a society’s way of balancing the spheres. A focus on style shows the actors’ role in creating

this motion; it shows “the welfare mix” *in the making* (Henriksen et al. 2015; Hustinx and De Waele 2015; Meilvang, Carlsen, and Blok 2018; Meriluoto 2018).

A fourth distinction that this approach should make researchers notice is between volunteering with living beings versus volunteering with inanimate objects. Short-term, sporadic volunteers who crave bonding with human (or even animal) recipients of aid can often do more harm than good. In contrast, people who are picking up trash on the beach do not have to get to know the beach. If you value volunteering for the free labor it provides, then it is crucial to distinguish between the kinds of volunteering that require no long-term engagement with a live recipient versus the kinds that do.

In the after-school programs I studied, some volunteers aimed for a transformational experience of deep emotional bonding. They hoped to achieve this instant intimacy by conducting rowdy snowball fights on the street with the kids at dusk, for example. But these short-term, sporadic volunteers’ relationship with the kids had to happen quickly, before the volunteer stopped coming. Distracting kids from doing their homework did more harm than good. Once in a great while, a volunteer succeeded in “bonding” quickly, usually with a lonely or fragile kid who was desperate for a bond; the short-term volunteer’s sudden ripping of the bond then did more harm than good, especially with kids who had dared to risk bonding and who most needed a reliable bond.

Fifth, and perhaps most surprisingly and urgently, this approach repeatedly reveals a reliably important distinction: actors’ time spent onsite. The main distinction may well not be between volunteers and staff but between those who have been working for many years—paid or unpaid—versus the plug-in, short-term employees or volunteers who help one day a week for a few weeks. Paid employees in social service jobs like those after-school programs can get to know their clients, whereas plug-in volunteers cannot.

This point requires a long illustration: in the after-school programs I studied, some long-term paid employees had deep knowledge of their kids. These employees were there every day, for years at a time, learning about the kids’ lives. I spent the most time with Emily. She usually had fifteen or so kids in her program over the course of the four and a half years I spent in her program with them. She had long-standing inside jokes with them; knew the kids’ teachers, parents, and neighbors; knew what their home life was like; knew more about the teens’ love lives than the teens’ parents knew; knew what each kid was learning in school; and even knew how fast some kids’ hair grew! When Emily would get together with paid staff from other nonprofit and state-sponsored after-school programs, they would have long, reflective discussions with each other, both about their own working conditions and about the kids’ living situations. These employees, in a loose network of youth programs around town, were nearly all white, and most of them had grown up in nearly all-white rural villages in the northern Midwest of the United States. After having repeated experiences of being trailed by security guards while shopping with their mostly African American program participants, these white adult employees now could joke and commiserate with each other about what “shopping while black” is like. When the adults were together, they critiqued their own programs, joking, for example, about a grant application’s demand that the applicants document how many crimes, drug addictions, and pregnancies their programs’ Friday night pizza parties had averted. These staff members were getting a good education in the schools of democracy that they were

creating for one another. What made it possible was “quantity time” with the youth: its duration and rhythm both mattered (Mische 2009).

Conversely, plug-in volunteers would come to the programs for a few months at a stretch at most, for an hour or two a week. Some adult volunteers were students from the nearby university who had to do volunteer work for a semester, starting in late September and ending in mid-November. Often, today’s volunteer would give advice that contradicted yesterday’s volunteer’s advice about how to do the homework. Once I was helping a girl with her homework who had been given contradictory advice each afternoon for three weeks on a long-term project. Now it was due in two days, and I was adding to the mess by saying that it looked to me like yesterday’s volunteer had encouraged her to ignore the teacher’s assignment. I went off to make a phone call, and when I came back, another volunteer had already undone my advice. I often heard kids lying to new volunteers (as most usually were new) about what they had been taught at school (the Pythagorean theorem? Conjugate *to be* in Spanish?) so they could weasel out of doing their homework. After a session or two like this, most adult volunteers gave up trying to offer homework help.

Clearing the overgrown underbrush of common sense pays off: common sense would have us focus on voluntary, unpaid labor, not voluntary, paid labor. But when we focus on what we value about volunteering, it becomes possible to see that the paid/unpaid distinction may matter less than, for example, time spent onsite. With this theoretical clarity, we can dive back into our field and notice something new: since employees typically spend more time onsite than sporadic, plug-in volunteers do, employees also have a better chance of creating those schools for democracy in these social service nonprofits than volunteers do. The historical dimension of volunteering becomes clear, then: in other historical moments, volunteers stayed onsite for decades, developing “invisible careers” working with the people they served (Daniels 1988; Hillman 1960). “Time spent onsite” becomes a distinction that the commonsense lens would have made impossible to see.

Conclusion

Yes, it is hard to draw a clear line between *volunteer* and *coerced*—to distinguish between volunteers who are controlled by the market, the state, or the moral order and those who are free. But this chapter ultimately argues that the borders between market, state, custom, and voluntary sector are often precisely where the most interesting action is: in that narrow, perhaps nonexistent space, for example, between the front and the back of that nonprofit/government New York park manager’s business card.

Instead of focusing on identifying voluntariness, then, we can focus on what it is we value about what volunteers are doing and on how they’re doing those things in relation to their organization and larger social structures. Whatever their possibly fleeting, probably mixed motives are, volunteers have to coordinate action in some patterned way. And by focusing on the varied forms of volunteering instead of trying to define them out of the picture, we can see the patterns in activities that people call volunteering and in organizations that people call nonprofits.