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# Factors that Drive Volunteerism in Nonprofit Organizations: A Theoretical Framework

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## Abstract

This chapter aims at examining and reviewing the factors that drive volunteering in nonprofit organizations. The chapter follows a multidisciplinary approach in defining and examining the factors that drives individuals to volunteer in nonprofit organizations. The chapter provides a theoretical framework on how different factors are associated with volunteerism in nonprofit organizations. This chapter provides analysis of the volunteerism concept by looking at factors that drive volunteerism from diverse standpoints.

**Keywords:** drivers, nonprofits, volunteerism, framework

## 1. Introduction

The study of volunteerism has yielded different theoretical and conceptual models [1]. It spans across fundamentally different disciplines, serves organizations in a wide variety of industries, and changes from one country to another. In India, volunteering is strictly defined as “social work,” while in Russia, no word is used to denote the concept [1]. Scholars who were admittedly daunted by the task of defining volunteerism, like Wilson [2] and Carson [3], noticed a pattern in literature. Definitions of volunteerism tend to state what “volunteerism is not” instead of defining what volunteerism is; “it is not paid labor, it is not slavery or forced labor, it is not kinship cate” [1].

This paper focuses on the interdisciplinary aspect of volunteerism. More specifically, we look at factors that drive volunteerism from multiple perspectives. Economic theory speculates that individuals are rational and self-interested. Hence, the notion of “unpaid labor” is absurd from an economic standpoint. Later, we look at how volunteerism is justified by economists. Sociologists, on the other hand, consider volunteerism to be a way of fostering social bonds, a sort of indulgence that serves the common good. While Economists assume rationality and sociologists look at social factors like solidary, psychologists inspect the “individual differences in psychological characteristics” [1]. In the last section, management factors are going to be discussed to answer further the question of why volunteers volunteer.

### 1.1 Subjective dispositions

Subjective disposition is a term that embeds many factors, namely, personality traits, motives, norms, and values. They can simply be described as the device or

devices with which people interpret their external environment, hence the word “subjective” because different interpretations come from different people. The second key word “dispositions” refers to a person’s tendency to react to a certain external stimulus. Subjective dispositions are inner factors that drive our choices in life.

### *1.1.1 Empathy*

Many studies attempted to link personality traits with volunteerism. This causal relationship unveiled some interesting findings. Empathy is one personality trait that received a lot of interest in literature. It is generally seen as an important driver in prosocial behaviors. Smith [4] found that empathy is positively correlated with altruistic behaviors. Using General Social Survey Data, 15 prosocial behaviors were found to be correlated with an emphatic personality. Altruistic behaviors may encompass both formal and informal volunteering. Because the focus of this paper is on formal volunteering, we can refer to Bekkers [5] who, having used data from the family survey of the Dutch population, has deduced that empathy is one conclusive characteristic that is found in people who volunteer. Einolf [6] and Mitani [7]’ results reconciled with Bekkers [5]. Empathy alone, however, was found to be insufficient to incite volunteerism. Wilhem and Bekkers [8] introduced a new variable called “principle of care” which describes the moral principle of helping others. Interestingly, emphatic concern was shadowed by the moral principle, indicating that the latter is much stronger than the mere emotion of empathy for others.

### *1.1.2 Extraversion*

Having studied empathy, Bekkers [5] analyzed further personality traits. Looking at extraversion this time, he found that this variable is positively related with volunteer work. Not only that, when measured in terms of intensity of engagement, extraversion was concluded to be more typical of volunteers and less related to those who hold mere memberships. One year later, another study scrutinized the relationship between extraversion and volunteerism. As predicted, extraversion was very much attached to the personality of someone who volunteers than someone who does not [9]. However, the approach that was adopted in this study was somewhat more skeptical. Instead of studying the direct relationship between the two variables, structural equation modeling was used to divulge indirect factors that are more likely to relate extraversion to volunteerism. This mediational model encompassed three variables: clubs and organization, church attendance, and contact with friends. The major premise is that extroverts, who are more sociable and friendly, would have more presence in clubs and organizations, a higher turn up rate in churches, and a larger network of friends. These mediating factors were found to be determinative of volunteerism. In other words, when these factors were statistically controlled for, extraversion did not show a direct effect on volunteerism.

Consistently, Brown [10] and Carlo et al. [11] found that extraversion was strongly related to volunteerism. The second study, having also considered the mediation effect, found that there was no direct evidence of the interaction effect between extraversion and volunteerism. Rather, both extraversion and agreeableness applied a joint effect on prosocial value motivation. Therefore, prosocial value motivation is the real impetus that drives volunteerism. This entails that an extrovert person would not volunteer unless he or she already values helping others [11]. We can then draw the connection between Carlo’s findings about prosocial value motivation and empathy that was previously discussed.

### *1.1.3 Agreeableness*

Carlo et al. [11] discovered that extraversion and agreeableness impacted prosocial value motivation conjointly. This brings us to our next variable: agreeableness. The same study uncovered that agreeableness had a significant direct impact on volunteerism [11]. One important distinguishing virtue of an agreeable person is compliance to others' requests. Volunteering is a field where compliance is needed. Hence, highly agreeable individuals would be more prone to volunteer than less agreeable individuals. A study utilizing the largest UK household survey (Understanding Society) assents to the before-mentioned positive relationship. Agreeableness was found to be positively associated with monetary donations and charitable causes [10]. On the other hand, an interesting conflicting outcome was pointed out by Bekkers [5]. This particular study endeavored to categorize volunteer work by distinguishing between political activism and civic engagement. Surprisingly, the study found that agreeableness was especially an attribute of political activists. This was sought to be peculiar because agreeableness was found to be positively correlated with empathy. In turn, empathy was proven to be positively related to civic engagement [5]. One major implication can be ratiocinated. That is, agreeableness is not typical of all volunteers.

### *1.1.4 Social phobias*

Following commonsensical reasoning, if agreeable, extroverts are more prone to participate in volunteer work. It is only fair to assume that those who suffer from social phobias or anxieties would be less disposed to do so. Likewise, Handy and Cnaan [12] confirmed this hypothesis and many other deriving suppositions. From the outset, it is important to nuance between individuals with clinical social phobia and those with a moderate degree of social phobia. Clinical social phobia is more acute and characterized by a crushing fear of social interactions along with excessive self-consciousness in daily situations. The second case, on the other hand, is less severe. Individuals with mild levels of social phobia still manage to muddle through while being fearful of what might happen. Measuring both cases with Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale, Handy and Cnaan [12] confirmed that people with higher social anxiety volunteer significantly less and are less susceptible to do so in the future. Additionally, the study investigated how people with different levels of social anxiety approached volunteering. As expected, people with higher levels of social phobia are more likely to volunteer upon request from a friend than on their own or through usual marketing tactics used by nonprofit organizations. Finally, the same study found that people with higher levels of volunteering prefer writing a check than actual volunteering. Donating money spares them the socially awkward confrontations and people's judgmental squints.

The last study presented us with ponderous insights about how nonprofit organizations should approach recruitment. Through personal asking, nonprofit organizations tend to face the volunteer recruitment fallacy, which holds that people who are presumed to be apt for volunteering do not actually volunteer. This leaves out a considerable population of shy and socially uncomfortable people who could potentially become productive volunteers. Besides social anxiety, depression was also found to be negatively related to volunteerism [13].

### *1.1.5 Conscientiousness*

Another interesting line of investigation looked at conscientiousness and its relationship to volunteerism. Conscientiousness describes a large spectrum of

constructs that revolve around self-control, hard work, rule abidance, and order in one's life [14]. Both Brown [10] and Donnelly et al. [15] concluded that conscientiousness is negatively related to volunteerism. Similarly, Bekkers [5] had found that volunteers were typically individuals with low level of conscientiousness. This is rather surprising because McCrae and John [16], in their initial description of the "Five Big Personality Traits," had described conscientiousness as being an impulsive, proactive behavior that stimulates growth through action.

#### *1.1.6 Openness to experience*

Another personality trait that was meticulously studied is openness to experience. Brown [10] found that, among all personality traits, openness to experience is the most substantial. He noted that one standard deviation increase is associated with a 6.4%-point rise in the measured variable (volunteerism). In contrast, Bekkers [8] established that openness had no impact on the intention of donating money or allocating time for a given cause. Another study joins Brown's findings, but from a different perspective. Olympiad volunteers in Iran were studied as a sample with the intention to predict the personality traits that make volunteers satisfied from their experiences. Openness to experience, which encircles aspects of personal curiosity, art appreciation, and learned wisdom, was significantly linked to volunteers' satisfaction.

#### *1.1.7 Solidarity*

The discipline of sociology scrutinized several subjective dispositions. However, a number of questions regarding the impact of solidarity on volunteering behavior remain unanswered. Solidarity, as defined by Oxford Dictionary, is "unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest; mutual support within a group" [17]. Although the variable was not directly inspected, some studies looked at similar patterns of behavior during community disasters. Adams and Boscarino [18] tried to bring forth a study where they explain what motivated people to volunteer during the World Trade Center Disaster (WTCD). Among other factors, volunteering was particularly associated with greater exposure to WTCD events and experiences of trauma from similar disastrous events [18]. This last study is reminiscent of Beyerlein and Sikkink [19] who looked at a pool of different independent variables, namely, proximity to the terrorist attack, personal connections to the victims, participation in religious congregations, patriotic responses, and so on. Interestingly, the two authors underline four variables that proved to be most relevant, that is, having previously known the victim, experiencing sorrow, feeling a personal responsibility to help the victims, and having volunteered prior to WTCD [19]. In retrospect, the feeling of solidarity figures in most of the variables mentioned, entailing that emotions are bolstered through community belongingness.

#### *1.1.8 Personal identity*

At the level of community, the feeling of solidarity has been proven to be a propelling force in the midst of chaos. From an individual perspective, we look at personal identity and its contribution to volunteerism. A growing body of literature has examined this relationship. However, before discussing the relationship between the two, we need to define the concept. According to Oyserman, personal identity provides answers to three pivotal questions: "Who am I?" "Where do I belong?" and "How do I fit?" [20]. The answers to these questions provide a biased

theory of ourselves. Personal identity is sought to be tentative and always striving to become better [20]. Through volunteerism, the latter can fulfill a purpose. Grönlund [21] put forward an interesting interactive model where different interviewees developed their own self-image, thereby arriving at different types of identities. Volunteers were subsequently classified into five categories of identities, namely, influencer identity, helper identity, faith-based identity, community identity, and success identity. Interestingly, 4 interviewees out of 24 fell in the category of helper identity. Benevolence was sought to be their most salient value in life. Along with concerns for universalism and conservation, they endeavored to help others and thus volunteer.

By the same token, Matsuba et al. [22] used structural equation modeling to arrive to similar results. Studying a sample of American adults, they assessed the mediating effect of the helping identity on volunteering commitment. The construct of this variable focused on to extent to which individuals felt that they actually have control over the welfare of others, try to help the others, or see themselves doing so in the future. The study then finds that commitment to volunteering is strongly motivated by people who identify more with a helping identity. Volunteering can also be used to cloak problems of identity or lack of perceived identity [23]. For instance, people who have troubles succeeding in their professional career turn to volunteering as a way of adopting a different mission in life. Other people try to embark in volunteer work to fight stigmas [24].

Before discussing the theory of volunteerism in economics, a noteworthy theory should be mentioned. The “low-cost hypothesis” asserts that the effect of personality characteristics on a given prosocial behavior is reduced when costs associated with the behavior are higher. Bekkers et al. [5] is a study that tracks the mediating effect of this theory in the context of personality characteristics and volunteerism. According to the theory, individuals with high wages should consider volunteering a high-cost activity, while individuals with low wages should see it as a low-cost activity. Interestingly, agreeable and conscientious people were found to be “less likely to participate as they earned more” [5]. Having introduced the concept of opportunity cost and how it meddles between the discussed factors and volunteerism, we now move to the economic theory of volunteerism.

### *1.1.9 Self-interest*

Economists joined this debate as well, contesting that people are motivated by self-interest when they decide to volunteer. Hayakawa [25] discusses the hidden facets of volunteer work. In his paper, he argues that volunteering today counts as work experience in CVs. It serves as a reference for the person’s ability to indulge a different social environment while away from one’s comfort zone. That said, Hayakawa is suspicious of the volunteer’s intention in this case and makes it clear that volunteer work is done to cover up the fact that the person is unable to find other alternatives in the job market. In this sense, economic theory challenges the altruistic mindset in volunteering, with the chief assumption that volunteers would not volunteer unless they have interest in the activity. Gee’s [26] demonstration of the latter assumption is fully endorsed by experimentation. In his paper, Gee compares between households who have children in multiple schools with households who got their children in the same school. With the aim to understand the real intention of parents’ time contribution in schools, Gee found that having children in the same school elevated the willingness to volunteer by 13%, hence concluding that parents are rather motivated by private interest of their own children rather than public interest for all students. Similarly, Maki and Synder [27] provide consistent results by showing that self-interest fuels the motivation to volunteer.

This theory of selfishness in volunteering received much attention due to the fact that it is startlingly repulsive, yet only intrinsic. Self-interest is rather common, even in the supposedly “untainted” act of giving. In public duty, firefighters were more responsive to emergency calls if they purchased vanity plates. This is indicative of self-praise in doing social good. Firefighters who feel pride in helping others are more responsible in their jobs [28]. Within the same context of work duty, Bekkers [8] found that if the invitation to volunteer is solicited by a hierarchical superior, the chances that the person would decline the invitation go down. Volunteers are also motivated by networking. Prouteau and Wolf [29] found a positive correlation between volunteer work and number friends. Apart from the relational motive, Fiorillo [30] finds that monetary rewards influence intrinsic motivations and therefore alter the person’s willingness to volunteer.

#### *1.1.10 Religion*

When investigating people’ inner motives, it is unavoidable to tap into the subject of religion.

Using the main sample of the midlife development in the United States, Taniguchi [31] finds that religion is, in fact, a significant predictor of the propensity to volunteer. In a brief description of his findings, Taniguchi asserts that volunteers demonstrate more behavioral religiosity than non-volunteers. This is consistent with Bekkers’s [5] positive correlation between church attendance and volunteer work, although it is noteworthy to mention that the Catholic European context is more active in volunteer work than the Orthodox one [32]. A common misconception is that religion-motivated volunteers are only more disposed to volunteer in religious institutions; Johnston [33] disputes against that by demonstrating that volunteerism is not only limited to religious institutions but rather expands into nonreligious institutions over time; Grönlund [34], with an ingenious attempt, scrutinizes different styles of religiousness. The first one having religion at the heart of volunteering and the second one associated with values and worldviews that an individual has, which in turn coincides with the religious views. The first type of religiousness is proven to be most associated with volunteerism [34].

The before-mentioned studies infer to religious affiliation. Inaba [35] approaches religion from a different aspect, the individual one. In his paper, Inaba argues that the source of volunteer work in the Japanese culture is inspired by “unconscious religiosity,” which infers to the tendency to magnify individual work to a more grandiose purpose. Unconscious religiosity in the Japanese culture is similar to the Western concept of spirituality. Nevertheless, spirituality was found to be a significant negative predictor in the United States [36].

## **1.2 Demographical characteristics**

In the broad and divisive debate of genetics versus environment, demographics are, for the most part, considered and given the attention they deserve. Needless to say that volunteering, like any other prosocial behavior, needs to be studied from that perspective as well. In this section of the literature review, we consider factors such as age, race, income, and education to further explain what drives volunteering.

### *1.2.1 Gender*

Most of the literature above use gender as a control variable in their analysis. It is such an easy variable to include regardless of the research methodology the study is using. However, it is important to note that most of the studies that we are about to

discuss have looked primarily at sex differences and how they impact volunteering, rather than just using gender as a mere control variable.

It seems that gender differences with regard to donating time and money vary from country to country. For the most part, women were more susceptible to volunteer than men. In the United States, for example, men do less volunteer work than women despite the fact they are at a slight disadvantage when it comes to income [37]. Einolf, therefore, suggests that prosocial motivation is more a characteristic of women than men. Other research support this finding [38]. The latest survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the United States confirmed this trend; 21.8% was the volunteer rate for men, while the rate for women was 27.8% [39]. In the United Kingdom, Brown [10] provides further evidence by stating that men donate 25% less than women. Surveys done in Australia consent to the findings to its fellow English-speaking countries, while Japan despite being distant in culture and language still shows more evidence for women volunteering than men [40]. In Canada, gender equality is reflected in men and women's tendencies to donate time or money, no significant difference between the two. Sweden lies at the other end of the spectrum with men being more prone to volunteer [40]. These cross-cultural differences could potentially indicate that the social aspect works as a stronger impetus to volunteering than the biological one.

Besides country considerations, gender differences vary across surveys. Most notably, lengthy surveys show little or no difference between men and women in volunteering [41, 42]. Hence, we can presume that the more a researcher digs by asking more questions, the slenderer the gap between men and women becomes.

Another noticeable difference lies in the nature of the volunteering activities that men or women tend to opt for. Men, for instance, are more likely to volunteer in sport and recreational activities, while women are interested in educational and human service organizations [40]. Nevertheless, looking at this study alone would rather provide a biased image. Organizations' standards in recruiting should also be taken into account. The domain of youth sport, which is essentially driven by volunteer workforce, is a good demonstration of double standards in recruitment. Men are mostly recruited for coaching positions, while women are recruited for supporting activities. Supporting activities involve back-office and secretarial work. As suggested by Messner and Bozada-Deas [43], gender roles in volunteer work are a mere reflection of gender roles in families. In this context, Wymer [44] validates some interesting hypothesis. He finds that females have a greater preference for nurturing roles in organizations such as helping infants and youth, while males are interested in risk-taking and dangerous volunteering experiences.

### *1.2.2 Race*

Like gender, race is almost always controlled for when investigating other independent variables. There is little focus on the variable itself to predict prosocial behaviors. Johnson and Lee [45] find that Asians have less propensity to volunteer than Hispanics or Whites. Interestingly, when looking at the Black community, only educated Black individuals passed the significance test. Wilson and Hughes [46] maintain that Whites are more likely to volunteer than any other ethnic or racial groups, while Taniguchi [31] finds no significant effect of race in his model.

### *1.2.3 Age*

There is a growing number of studies that looks at the impact of volunteerism on the well-being and mental illness of elderly individuals [47, 48]. That is obviously beyond the scope of our study. We are rather interested in the antecedents

of volunteerism. That said, age difference showed different motivational factors. For young individuals, it is the knowledge-seeking process that was more impelling [49]. This is only reasonable since the learning curve for young people is more curved upward than that of older people. Older people, on the other hand, were more driven by social motives [49]. In contrast, Dávilla and Díaz-Morales [50] found that younger people are more motivated by making new acquaintances than younger ones. However, the same study agreed with [49] with regard to career and knowledge concerns. While these two studies focused on age alone, most of the other studies that we discussed in previous sections controlled for that variable.

#### *1.2.4 Education*

There was a clear consensus in literature about how volunteerism is affected by educational attainment. That is, a positive causal relationship [5, 10, 12, 51]. One particular study looked further at why education is such a strong predictor of volunteerism. Gesthuizen and Scheepers [52] tested nine ingeniously crafted hypotheses that consist of mediating factors that may interfere in the presumed relationship of volunteerism and education. We mention the validated ones, starting with the cognitive competence. The latter is enhanced and polished in academic formation and sought to induce volunteer work. Additionally, higher education was linked to higher-status jobs with broader horizons and therefore higher tendency to volunteer. Lastly, the strong positive relationship between volunteerism and education is explained by the fact that educated people have a more comprehensive understanding of world problems and more awareness leads to action.

### **1.3 Management factors**

For a long time, nonprofit organizations were cautious with being associated with profit organizations. With the birth of hardcore capitalism, management practices were rather cruel and not considering of the workforce that was, for the most part, exploited. Today, however, management is no longer a “dirty word” [53].

Nonprofit organizations are today’s essential. They are no longer the “trivial and inconsequential organizations” [54], and their influence in the political arena is far-stretched. “They have made a crucial difference in the way international justice is delivered” [55]. As their growth is going through the roof, their management approaches had to adapt and thrive. Nonprofit organizations are now faced with certain overwhelming expectations; this convergence toward professionalization is only natural to produce the high-quality services they are expected to deliver [56].

Because the trend of management in nonprofits is relatively new, the methodological design remains poor. Contrary to the conclusive results that we discussed in other factors, causal inferences cannot be drawn on this one [57]. The use of longitudinal design approaches raises a lot of questions about the legitimacy of the volunteerism research with regard to management practices.

Some studies, however, have taken the initiative to use more reliable methodologies. Tang et al. [58] used structural equation modeling to inspect the direct and indirect relationship between organizational support and volunteering benefits. The study subsequently concluded that organizational support linked was positively related to two variables of socioemotional benefits: perceived contribution and personal benefit. Surprisingly, an older study applied bivariate analysis and regression analysis to look into the impact of management practices, namely, recruiting, orientation, training, and supervision [59]. The positive relationship was found to be significant in this study as well, so was the case in [60–62], Stirling et al. [63]

on the other hand, found that rigid management practices of keeping records, for example, are negatively associated with the retention of volunteers.

There is an abundant amount of other research that looks at similar concepts of organizations' incentivizing practices in nonprofits. Again, the methods used suffer from a plethora of pitfalls. They typically focus on specific cases, with no accurate sampling, which in turn limits the extent to which the results can be generalized [64].

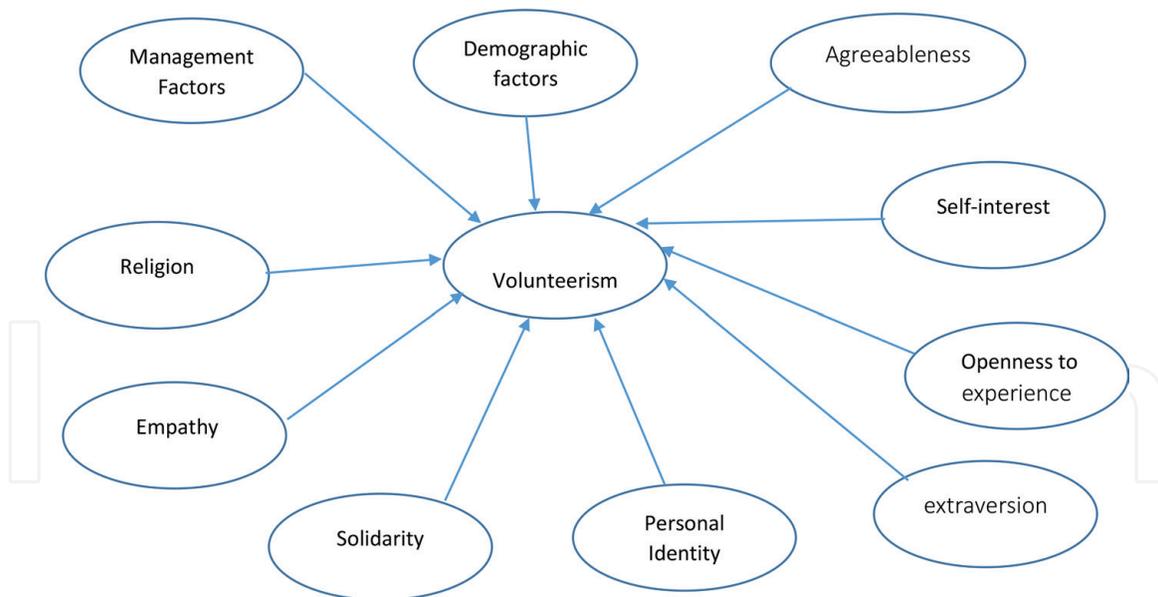
Nesbit et al. [65] have developed a useful framework to assess volunteer involvement, with a special focus on how organizations affect volunteers' recruitment and retention. Organizations' characteristics were divided into "nature" and "nurture." The first type deals with characteristics that stem from the organization's nature such as mission, location, and sources of funds, while the second type includes leadership, culture, and staff receptivity to volunteers. Nesbit et al. [65] judge that organizations should rather focus on the "nurture" side of their volunteer program as it can more readily influence than characteristics found in the "nature" side; it is easier for an organization to change its style of leadership than to change its location.

Another exploratory study was done by Carvalho and Sampaio [66]. Using a multiple case study analysis of five Portuguese nonprofits, the study concludes that volunteering is "mostly an informal affair." Formal strategic planning is a scarce practice, and volunteer recruitment is conventionally transmitted through word of mouth. Even in the selection process, informality dominates as interviewers rarely have pre-defined criteria that need to be met. Training, although critical to the retention of volunteers, remains limited to one initial session only. Furthermore, Carvalho and Sampaio investigate other dimensions that are interrelated to the best practice in volunteer management. We can refer to the example of "centrality," defined in the paper as "the extent to which volunteer contribution is central to the organization's mission and is integrated into the overall running of the organization" [66]. Having contrasted two nonprofit organizations, one that is fully reliant on volunteers and another where paid employees ensure the central tasks, Carvalho and Sampaio assert that centrality to the mission and reliance on volunteers dictate the effort put into implementing good volunteer management practices.

Within the context of volunteer management practices, Ferreira et al. [54] devised a "life cycle of volunteers" with three critical phases: exploratory, developmental, and mature phase. The first stage is rather tentative; volunteers are yet to decide if they want to stay in the organization. In the second stage, volunteers are presumably more certain of their decision to stay in the organization and hence start to contribute. In the last stage, contribution is maximized and volunteers are now in a position to give to others. Ferreira et al. [54] advice that organizations need to approach these stages with effective management practices. In the first stage, where volunteers are indecisive, organizations ought to devise an ample plan to recruit them. In the second stage, training is, without a question, necessary as volunteers are still not equipped with the necessary tools to deal with some situations. Lastly, as volunteers mature and grow, rewarding is central to their retention as they are now a valuable asset to the organization.

## **2. Conclusion**

This paper analyzed the interdisciplinary aspect of volunteerism. We looked at factors that drive volunteerism from an economic, sociological, psychological, and managerial standpoint. Literature considering the relationship between personality traits and volunteer work was meticulously studied. Most notably, empathy and extraversion proved to be highly correlated with volunteerism. Mediating factors were also unveiled, such as "principle of care" for the case of empathy. Agreeableness



**Figure 1.**  
*Volunteerism drivers: A theoretical framework.*

was linked to volunteer work but was not typical of all volunteers. On the other hand, conscientiousness was negatively related to volunteer work. Unsurprisingly, people with social phobias were less prone to volunteer. Other variables such as openness to experience, solidarity, and personal identity were given equal importance. We also looked at the economic theory of volunteerism that speculates that individuals are self-interested when they decide to volunteer. Moreover, we considered religion and its impact on individuals' willingness to volunteer. Then, we turned our focus to demographical factors such as gender, race, age, and education to provide a fuller and more solid answer to our research question. Lastly, we shifted from the perspective of the individual to that of the organization to see how management affect the willingness to volunteer. Based on the previous discussion, we suggest the following framework as presented in **Figure 1** which can be a subject to future examination for validity purposes.

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