COMMENTARY

"Can't you see I'm burned out!": An exploration of potential downsides of volunteering

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Introduction

Tippins and colleagues (2023) offer a thoughtful call to action in their focal article on industrial–organizational (I-O) psychology and volunteer work. Certainly, they provide many strong arguments and compelling case studies that demonstrate the potential benefits of I-O psychologists being more involved in volunteering. In general, we support their call and hope that this inspires I-O psychologists to work more closely with worthy, purpose-driven organizations. That said, as I-O psychologists, we know that even the brightest of constructs and experiences may have dark sides (e.g., Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014; Smith et al., 2018). Based on personal experience and evidence from the literature, we offer some critiques that explore potential downsides to volunteering. In our response, we identify and discuss three important questions to consider regarding the individual volunteer and the organizations that may be involved in and/or benefit from such an effort:

- How might volunteers experience, and avoid, burnout in their volunteer roles?
- What kinds of services are appropriate to offer pro bono?
- What sorts of organizations represent "worthy" recipients of our time and talents?

In raising these questions, we hope to help individual volunteers and institutions like the SIOP Foundation avoid potential pitfalls that may accompany a broad-based volunteer effort as described in Tippins et al. We further discuss implications and recommendations to address these issues.

Avoiding burnout, or the challenge of being a "giver"

Upon reading the focal article, we could not help but be reminded of the season 5 episode of the sitcom *Seinfeld* (Mehlman & Cherones, 1993), in which Jerry Seinfeld is dating a massage therapist. Jerry is frustrated that his new partner, Jodi, will not give him a massage. It turns out that the last thing Jodi wants to do with her time outside of work is to give even one more massage. This humorous example points to a very real workplace issue: burnout. In his work on prosocial motivations and behaviors, Adam Grant (2013; Bolino & Grant, 2016; Grant & Campbell, 2007; Grant & Mayer, 2009) suggests that givers may be particularly susceptible to burnout. Research suggests that unmitigated giving, without concern for one's own well-being, may lead to negative consequences (e.g., Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). Those givers who successfully give without burning out are those who can balance their prosocial motivations (i.e., "other" interest) with self-interest.

That is, the givers who are most energized by giving of their time and energy are those who also take time for rest and recovery.

To be clear, we are not advocating for Jodi's approach of completely withholding volunteer effort during one's nonwork time. We agree with Tippins and colleagues that volunteer work can be "enormously rewarding" (p. 7) for the volunteer and can have positive effects in society and for the field. However, it is important to recognize that such efforts can also be draining. Individuals may need to consider how and when they offer their services to prevent burning out. Viewing volunteer roles as "jobs" of a sort, we suggest considering insights from the job demands-resources (and related) literature(s) to avoid burning out on the volunteer "job." Specifically, finding a volunteer role that offers some control over how one expends their time and effort may offer a way for volunteers to avoid burning out (Fernet et al., 2013).

The following example may help illustrate how an individual might craft their volunteer role in ways that prioritize the volunteer's autonomy and control over their time and effort. Prior to changing careers and becoming an academician, the first coauthor of this commentary spent over a decade in nonprofit fundraising. Although this example is not strictly I-O psychology, the professional services requested by the organization share similar psychological strains and the need for rest and recovery. The following case, an autoethnographic report from Author 1, demonstrates a healthy volunteer role that allows the individual the autonomy to offer their professional services on their own terms.

> As you can imagine, fundraising skills were in high demand among the nonprofit organizations I volunteered for. However, in many cases, I was reluctant to offer my services as it can be taxing work and organizational leaders often had unrealistic expectations of what was possible. In such situations, I often felt pressure to perform as the "expert" in that domain, and I had to have some uncomfortable conversations around managing expectations. At one point in my personal life, however, I received assistance from a nonprofit organization after receiving a difficult medical diagnosis. Out of gratitude, I volunteered to help the organization with physician outreach. Essentially this work entailed educating doctors treating similar conditions, so they could offer resources to recently diagnosed patients and connect them with the services provided by this organization. A few years later, I was asked to participate in a fundraising effort, and I gladly agreed to help. It is because this organization treated me as a whole person, not just a set of desirable skills and experiences, and offered me the opportunity to offer my services on my terms that I agreed to support their fundraising efforts.

This case illustrates how being given some control over their volunteer role enables the individual to decide when and how it is most appropriate for them to offer professional services. The volunteer in this case was able to offer a broad range of skills (e.g., listening and educating) to help the organization and was able to choose when to engage specific, vocationally relevant skills.

When "free time" looks a lot like work

The previous section detailed a situation in which the volunteer's time and energy were given on their own terms, and the volunteer was able to choose where and how they provided professional services as part of their volunteer work. Assuming that the volunteer does have the time and energy to spare and is willing to perform vocationally relevant volunteer work, it is important to consider what sorts of volunteer activities should be provided and what might be best suited for a consulting engagement. Again, we are interested in the volunteer's ability to manage their psychological resources. We suggest that volunteer roles, when they closely resemble the tasks one performs in their professional role, may add to role strain and lead to spillover effects across the work–family interface (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000). Prior authors have argued for the importance

of boundaries between work and personal life, and how when these lines are blurred the lack of separation can lead to increased stress and burnout (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Empirical work on volunteers suggests that—much like in professional workplaces—volunteer expectations and role overload are linked with burnout and turnover intention (Chen & Yu, 2014; Moreno-Jiménez & Villodres, 2010).

In the case below, we describe the experience of our second author, who has over 15 years of experience in human resource management (HRM). HRM shares many core principles with I-O psychology, including understanding and developing individuals in the workplace. This field also shares the mental and emotional strains along with the need for rest and balance. The following case, an autoethnographic report from Author 2, is an example of two different volunteer requests that affected the individual's perception of role strain and work–family balance very differently.

> I entered the human resource field initially to help others. I think that is one of the reasons many go into service occupations. However, I quickly learned, especially if you are good at your job, others will seek you out for assistance. I did and still view this as an honor to be valued. It is intrinsically rewarding to be able to help others, especially nonprofit organizations. I have volunteered for nonprofit organizations and government sector service organizations, and these are some of my most gratifying experiences. However, I had to learn how to not overextend myself. There are different time constraints and requirements, depending on what the organization's individual needs are. For example, I have gladly served on various search committees to assist nonprofits with the selection and hiring process. This is usually a relatively short process without sacrificing too much time away from my job and my family. However, I have also been asked to write an employee handbook for a nonprofit, and while I wanted to assist, I knew that this would take a taxing amount of time and effort to accomplish, and I regrettably had to decline. While my internal drive and motivation is to help others, I am having to learn to try to balance volunteering and my time to prevent burnout.

As illustrated in the case above, a burned-out volunteer is not able to do much good for the organizations that need their services. Thus, we encourage prospective volunteers to consider how to set boundaries regarding not only the timing of when such work is done (as in the first case), but what types of volunteer tasks are agreed to (as in the second). We suggest that it may be appropriate to take on small-scope, short-term projects in service to a nonprofit, but larger scale, more labor-intensive projects may be too much to ask of a volunteer. It is one thing to serve on a board, offer policy advice, or assist with an interview process. It is quite another to be asked to write policy manuals or design selection systems.

"Nonprofits" in name only?

Assuming that our I-O psychology volunteer work force has considered the questions above and is prepared to begin their volunteer work, Tippins and colleagues offer what may be a very useful and practical way to connect them with organizations that need help. Specifically, they suggest the creation of a network "that enables charitable organizations to share their needs and I-O psychologists to highlight their capabilities and connects the two" (p. 21). However, this discussion raised questions for us about the definition of "nonprofit" or "charitable organization." It may be worth noting that the term "nonprofit" simply refers to a tax-exempt designation, and there is tremendous variation in the nonprofit sector regarding the size and scope of organizations and their missions. In fact, some "nonprofits" may possess the required tax designation but have missions that are antithetical to the values of SIOP and its members, a concern raised by Tippins et al.

In addition to considering the missions and values of the organizations connected with this initiative, it may also be worth considering the size of the organizations. The authors of this commentary have worked with and for massive nonprofit organizations, some with budgets in excess of $1 billion and staff in excess of 10,000. Would such organizations benefit from the work of I-O psychologists? Certainly. Should such an organization pay for these services? The answer here is less clear, but large nonprofit organizations routinely spend hundreds of thousands (sometimes millions) of dollars with external consultants to help plan and execute fundraising campaigns, provide leadership coaching, conduct diversity training, and more. Certainly, such organizations are doing important work in addressing societal problems, but we believe it is at least worth asking whether such organizations should be prioritized in offering pro bono professional services. Tippins and colleagues suggest that one of the benefits of this initiative would be helping organizations that are unable to afford such services. Our concern is that large nonprofits, many of which can afford such services, might crowd out smaller, less well-endowed nonprofits who are truly unable to afford them. In establishing a network that connects I-O psychologist volunteers with charitable organizations, it may be worth considering what types of organizations are included in this network and the type and scope of activities deemed appropriate to provide.

Conclusion

We commend Tippins and colleagues for their call to action for I-O psychologists to be more active in volunteering with nonprofit organizations engaged in worthy causes. As long-time, committed volunteers ourselves, we further agree with many of the stated benefits that are enumerated in their focal article (e.g., intrinsic rewards, a chance to practice skills, and broader understanding of I-O psychology). However, in our experience, we have learned the importance of being what Herbert Simon (1993) called "intelligent altruists," giving of ourselves in ways that are energizing rather than draining. This may be particularly relevant to early-career I-O psychologists and tenure-track faculty (like the coauthors of this commentary), who should be careful to find a balance in their work and nonwork lives. With this in mind, the purpose of this commentary is to raise some potentially overlooked issues that may be worth considering before engaging in such work or committing institutional resources toward supporting it. Specifically, we identify individual psychological factors (e.g., role strain and burnout) that may accompany unfettered altruism, and institutional factors such as the potential for larger, more well-resourced nonprofit organizations to crowd out smaller, more community-based organizations in the search for pro bono I-O psychology services. In short, we generally support a broader effort to provide volunteer services among I-O psychologists, as long as it is done with eyes wide open to some of the potential downsides.

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