

1-1999

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### Recommended Citation

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*Special Topics, General*. Paper 40.  
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## Research Article

# THE EFFECTS OF “MANDATORY VOLUNTEERISM” ON INTENTIONS TO VOLUNTEER

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**Abstract**—*With the widespread emergence of required community-service programs comes a new opportunity to examine the effects of requirements on future behavioral intentions. To investigate the consequences of such “mandatory volunteerism” programs, we followed students who were required to volunteer in order to graduate from college. Results demonstrated that stronger perceptions of external control eliminated an otherwise positive relation between prior volunteer experience and future intentions to volunteer. A second study experimentally compared mandates and choices to serve and included a premeasured assessment of whether students felt external control was necessary to get them to volunteer. After being required or choosing to serve, students reported their future intentions. Students who initially felt it unlikely that they would freely volunteer had significantly lower intentions after being required to serve than after being given a choice. Those who initially felt more likely to freely volunteer were relatively unaffected by a mandate to serve as compared with a choice. Theoretical and practical implications for understanding the effects of requirements and constraints on intentions and behavior are discussed.*

For decades now, psychologists have sought to understand the factors that lead people to help others in need (see Krebs & Miller, 1985). Initial work focused on helping in emergencies or other short-term “spontaneous helping” situations in which a potential helper is faced with an unexpected need for help, calling for an immediate decision to act, and an opportunity to provide one and only one relatively brief act of help (e.g., Latané & Darley, 1970). More recently, students of helping behavior have increasingly come to recognize that, to gain a fuller understanding of who helps and why, they must also study helping that is planned and sustained over time (e.g., Clary, Snyder, Ridge, et al., 1998; Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Smith, 1994; Snyder & Omoto, 1992). The prototypical example of planned, sustained helping is volunteerism. Every year, millions of people volunteer their time and effort to act as tutors for children and adults, companions for the lonely, and health care providers for the sick; in 1995 alone, an estimated 23 million American adults spent at least 5 hr each week in volunteer service (Independent Sector, 1996).

However, even though many people do volunteer, many do not (51% of 1995 survey respondents had not volunteered in the past 12 months; Independent Sector, 1996). Indeed, society has recognized that extra effort may be necessary to inspire its members to help, and consequently the United States has created federal programs such as the Peace Corps and VISTA. Recently, the call to volunteer has become even louder as those in need of help see public supports eliminated. To promote citizen participation, various institutions have start-

ed to use their authority to require, as opposed to “inspire,” individuals to engage in community service. In particular, many educational institutions have sought to increase levels of “volunteer” activity by requiring community service of their students (Keith, 1994). Moreover, governments have gone so far as to establish community-service requirements as conditions of graduation from high school (e.g., the State of Maryland; Sobus, 1995).

In addition to directly enhancing the welfare of the community, an implicit, if not always explicit, goal of these “mandatory volunteerism” programs is to increase levels of future volunteerism, thereby ensuring a continuing pool of volunteers from which the community can draw in times of need (Sobus, 1995). Many service-learning proponents believe that requiring students to volunteer will accomplish this goal by promoting the personal, social, and civic development of students and the internalization of prosocial values that lead to intentions to volunteer (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Sobus, 1995). However, mandating volunteerism with such aims in mind raises the question of whether behavior performed under external pressure actually leads to internalization of prosocial values and future behavioral intentions (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1987).

Indeed, it can be argued that requirements to volunteer may reduce interest in volunteer activities by altering individuals’ perceptions of why they help. If mandated students begin to perceive that they help only when required or rewarded, then their intentions to freely engage in volunteer service in the future may be reduced (e.g., Batson, Coke, Jasnosi, & Hanson, 1978; Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1998; Kunda & Schwartz, 1983). In keeping with this theory, Piliavin and Callero (1991) reported that blood donors who gave blood for the first time under coercion expressed lesser intentions to continue donating in the future than those who were not coerced. Requirements (and other coercive techniques) may also engender psychological reactance (Brehm & Brehm, 1981); limiting an individual’s freedom to act may lead to desires to reestablish that freedom, which can be accomplished by derogating the forced activity and by refusing to perform it once the mandate has been lifted.

Most theories about the undermining of interest in an activity suggest that this effect may be strongest for individuals with initial interest in the activity (e.g., Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973). One important indicator of interest in volunteering is previous involvement in volunteer activities, and we expect that experienced individuals may be most likely to suffer from required service programs; in other words, predictions of an inhibiting effect presuppose that individuals possess established behavioral intentions and habits that can be inhibited by a requirement. Given that a principal defining characteristic of volunteerism is its sustained nature, it is not unreasonable to expect that prior volunteer experience may play a pivotal role in determining how people respond to mandatory volunteerism programs. Certainly, under ordinary circumstances, prior experience is an influential determinant of later intentions. For example, Charng, Piliavin, and Callero (1988) have shown that continued experience as a blood donor can

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lead to the role of blood donor becoming a central part of the self-concept and donating becoming habitual and routine. We do not doubt that the same process occurs for other types of volunteerism. However, when requirements to serve are placed on experienced volunteers, their intentions to continue to engage in voluntary action may be short-circuited.

Although an inhibiting effect can be theorized to occur for those persons with established histories of volunteer action, we suggest that prior experience itself may not be the sole predictor of the consequences of mandatory volunteerism. Indeed, survey research indicates that many students have a positive attitude toward instituting community-service requirements at their schools (e.g., Independent Sector, 1992), and may not feel particularly "forced" into volunteerism because they are already advocates of such service-learning programs. Other students, however, have a less positive attitude and may feel that these programs are unnecessary and that they will volunteer when and if they have the time and inclination; these students might feel forced to serve.

Given students' varied reactions to mandatory volunteerism, we hypothesized that the effects of prior experience on intentions to volunteer following required service are moderated by perceptions of the external control being exerted by the requirements. Feeling forced to volunteer may weaken the positive relation between past experience and future intentions. Thus, in a study testing this hypothesis, we predicted that when individuals perceived lower levels of external control, their prior experience and future intentions would be positively related; that is, as prior experience increased, so too would intentions to volunteer in the future. However, we expected that when individuals perceived higher levels of external control, prior experience and future intentions would be unrelated or perhaps even negatively related; in other words, as prior experience increased, future intentions would remain relatively constant or perhaps even decrease. This pattern of results would demonstrate that under high levels of perceived external control, individuals with the most prior experience (who would otherwise have the highest future intentions) suffer the greatest inhibiting effect on their intentions to volunteer.

## STUDY 1

In 1993, the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, incorporated a new graduation requirement into its undergraduate business program: All students were required to engage in 40 hr of community service. A noncredit, tuition-free course, coordinated by a business faculty member, was designed to track students' fulfillment of the requirement and to help them choose an appropriate service opportunity (e.g., being a companion to an elderly person or a tutor to an illiterate child). The introduction of this requirement provided us with a "real world" laboratory in which we could follow students, all of whom were required to volunteer, over the course of their service and examine the factors that affected their intentions to volunteer subsequently.

## Method

*Participants*

A total of 371 business majors (192 men and 179 women) who were required to enroll in the service-learning course (Business 200, or B200) completed initial and follow-up surveys as a component of

the course.<sup>1</sup> Data were collected from six separate classes between the fall of 1993 and the spring of 1995.

*Procedure*

Participants completed surveys, administered during the first and last class meetings of B200, which marked the beginning and end of their mandated service performed over the course of 12 weeks. The initial survey included measures of prior volunteer experience and the extent to which participants felt they were engaging in service only because they were required, as well as other measures. The follow-up survey included among its items measures of future intentions to volunteer.

Thus, to assess just how much participants felt they were performing their community service because of the mandate, we developed a two-item measure ( $r = .46, p < .01$ ) for use in the pretest: "I am participating in B200 only because it is required of me" and "Even if I weren't in the B200 program, I would be volunteering" (reverse coded). The combined scale ranged from 2 to 14 (with higher scores indicating greater perceptions of external control<sup>2</sup>) and had a mean of 8.3 and a standard deviation of 3.4.

At the end of the program, participants were asked to indicate the likelihood (on a 7-point scale; 1 = *extremely unlikely*, 7 = *extremely likely*) that they would volunteer at several points in the future. Our behavioral-intentions index was an average of responses to six items: "I will work at the same site next semester," "I will volunteer somewhere else next semester," "I will be a volunteer 1 year from now," "I will be a volunteer 3 years from now," "I will be a volunteer 5 years from now," and "I will be a volunteer 10 years from now." The internal consistency (alpha) of this index was .82.

## Results

We predicted that for students who perceived lower levels of external control, prior volunteer experience would be an influential and positive determinant of later intentions to continue their work in the future; by contrast, students who felt higher levels of external control would demonstrate a much weaker relation between experience and intentions, mostly because experienced volunteers would have

1. The 371 participants came from a pool of 612 business majors who were enrolled in B200 during the time period of this study. Thirty-six of these students did not attend the orientation session and thus did not complete the initial survey. Of those students who completed the initial survey, 64.4% also completed the follow-up survey. The 35.6% of students who did not complete the final survey had been excused by the instructor from the final session of the course, when the final survey was administered, and failed to return a mailed follow-up survey. On average, these students were significantly older, were more likely to be male, and had more of their time set aside for a paid job than students who completed the final survey. For an additional 39 students, data for one or more of the variables included in our analyses were missing; these students were included only in those analyses for which it was appropriate.

2. Correlates of perceptions of external control were investigated. Higher perceptions of control were significantly associated with fewer months of prior experience ( $r = -.13$ ), age ( $r = .11$ ), and the motivations measured by our (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, et al., 1998) Volunteer Functions Inventory ( $r$ s from  $-.15$  to  $-.50$ ). A significant gender difference in perceptions of control indicated that men had higher perceptions of control ( $M = 8.87$ ) than women ( $M = 7.45$ ),  $t(330) = -3.87, p < .000$ .

comparatively lower intentions. We employed hierarchical regression to investigate this hypothesis.

Specifically, the strategy used to test such moderated effects involved entering the *past experience* factor (estimated total number of months volunteered in one's lifetime;  $M = 12$  months,  $SD = 18$  months<sup>3</sup>) on the first step of the regression analysis and then entering the *external control* factor on the second step and the *interaction* term (a multiplicative product of the first two scores) on the third step. Moderation was indicated by a significant increase in the  $r^2$  value from Step 2 to Step 3 (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

The results of this analysis demonstrated that past experience had a main effect on intentions: Students with more experience were more likely to intend to volunteer in the future at the program's end than were students who began with less experience,  $r^2 = .036$ ,  $F(1, 330) = 12.28$ ,  $p < .001$ . There was also a main effect of perceptions of external control on intentions (after experience had already been entered into the equation); students who felt more external control upon starting B200 were less likely to intend to volunteer at its finish,  $r^2$  improvement = .177,  $F(1, 329) = 74.10$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Our primary hypothesis, however, was that the effects of experience on students' intentions would be moderated by perceptions of external control, and, indeed, we found a statistically significant interaction of experience and external control,  $r^2$  improvement = .021,  $F(1, 328) = 8.86$ ,  $p < .01$ . When students perceived the service-learning program to be more controlling of their behavior, the positive relation between past volunteer experience and future intentions was weakened; thus, students who had the greatest past experience and who also felt controlled did not have the highest future intentions—instead, their intentions were undermined by the requirement. For those students who did not feel controlled, past experience was positively correlated with future intentions (i.e., students with the most experience were most likely to intend to volunteer in the future). To provide a graphic representation of this analysis, we plotted regression lines for three levels of external control: the mean, 1 standard deviation above the mean, and 1 standard deviation below the mean (as recommended by Cohen & Cohen, 1983, p. 323) (see Fig. 1).

As is apparent from this graph, students with lower levels of perceived external control (plotted at external control = 4.9) demonstrated a positive relation between prior experience and future intentions (the upwardly sloping regression line). Students at higher levels of perceived external control (external control = 11.7) demonstrated a slightly negative relation between prior experience and future intentions (the downwardly sloping regression line). For students at the mean of the external-control scale (external control = 8.3), prior experience and future intentions were essentially unrelated (the middle regression line, which is almost flat).

## Discussion

The findings of this field study demonstrated that in the context of a mandatory volunteerism program, behavioral intentions to engage in volunteer work in the future were positively related to past histories of volunteerism—but only for students who did not feel that the program

3. Six individuals with outlying scores on the experience variable (more than 6 years of prior experience) had their scores altered to 73 months, as recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (1996, p. 69).

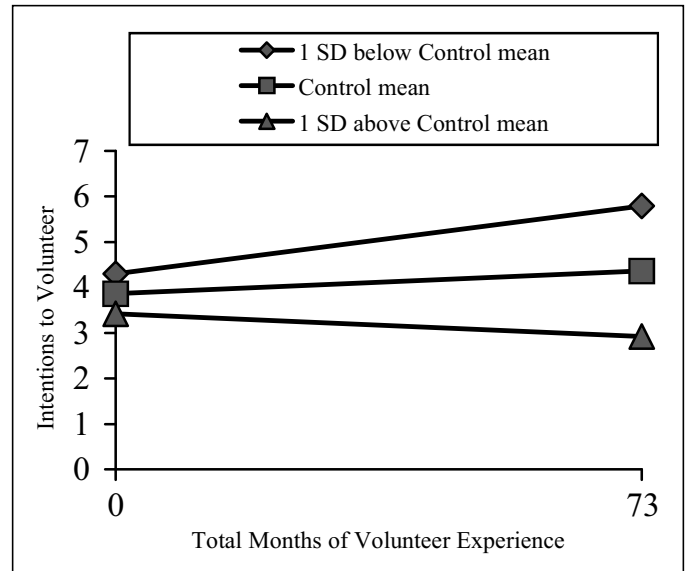


Fig. 1. Future intentions to volunteer regressed on prior volunteer experience at three levels of perceived external control.

had overly controlled their behavior. These results support the findings of earlier research demonstrating that external constraints to act, in the form of requirements or rewards, may reduce interest in an activity (e.g., Batson et al., 1978; Kunda & Schwartz, 1983). This research has consistently shown that such decrements in interest result most strongly for individuals with prior interest in an activity. Indeed, in our study, when external constraints were perceived to be controlling, an inhibiting effect was strongest for participants with greater prior experience as volunteers—individuals for whom such an inhibiting effect was possible.

Conducting this research with students in an actual mandatory volunteerism program gives us confidence that we have assessed reactions to requirements as they exist in actual educational environments. Yet investigating these effects in the field with actual required volunteers also meant that we were unable to conduct a true experiment; all participants were exposed to the same mandatory volunteerism program, and we could not randomly assign students to conditions and compare those who had been mandated to volunteer with those who had been assigned to choose to volunteer. However, the students entered the program with sufficient variability in their assessments of whether they would be volunteering regardless of the requirement, and our statistical analysis of the moderating effects of perceptions of control allowed us to make comparisons that are functionally similar to those that would be available from an experimental manipulation of mandated and freely chosen volunteerism.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, with our second study, we did conduct an experimental examination in which participants were randomly assigned to be required or freely allowed to volunteer; in this way, we could more conclusively demonstrate whether or not future intentions to volunteer were inhibited by requirements to serve.

4. This examination of the moderating effect of external control on the relation between past experience and prospectively measured future intentions involved predicting a higher order interaction between variables. Such predictions, in some ways, also reduce the threats to internal validity in our nonexperimental design (Cook & Campbell, 1979).

## STUDY 2

In Study 2, we used experimental methods in the laboratory to explicitly compare two routes to volunteerism, requirements and free choices. One possible outcome of an explicit comparison of the effects of required and more freely chosen service is that future intentions will be much higher after volunteer activity is freely chosen than after volunteer activity is required. That is, if service is not required but instead "induced" with an eye toward maintaining students' perceptions of self-determination, students may be less likely to demonstrate the ill effects of feeling controlled.

Given the results of our first study, it seemed likely, however, that individuals' reactions to a manipulation of mandated versus freely chosen volunteerism might depend on their initial feelings about whether external control would be necessary to get them to volunteer. That is, we thought those who would freely volunteer (without a requirement) might not be differentially affected by being mandated or given a choice; they might be unlikely to have their intentions undermined by a requirement. Those who initially felt that a requirement would be necessary to get them to volunteer might feel more externally controlled by a mandate than a choice; consequently, they could have their intentions undermined by a requirement but not a free choice.

Therefore, in this second study, we examined not only the situational effects of mandates and choices to volunteer, but also whether such effects were moderated by preexisting person-centered judgments about externally controlled volunteerism. In a pretest, long before students were invited to the laboratory, we measured their perceptions about whether they would volunteer freely or only if controlled.<sup>5</sup> Our prediction was that students who thought a high degree of external control would be necessary to get them to volunteer would have much lower intentions to volunteer after being required to serve than after being given a choice; we also expected that students who thought they were likely to volunteer freely (i.e., who thought little external control would be necessary to get them to volunteer) would have higher intentions to volunteer and that their intentions would be relatively unaffected by being mandated to serve (as compared with freely choosing to do so).

## Method

*Participants*

Sixty-three University of Minnesota psychology undergraduates (35 men and 28 women) participated in the study for extra credit.

*Procedure*

At the start of the semester, participants completed measures related to their inclinations to volunteer freely. Specifically, they responded on 7-point scales to the following questions: "To what extent do you believe that you would only volunteer if it were required of you?" and "To what extent do you believe that when you volunteer it will be because you freely choose to do so?" (reverse coded). Answers to these two items were correlated at  $r = .31$  and were averaged into a scale

5. Because the effects of control existed even for participants lowest in experience in our first study, we chose not to reexamine the effects of experience in Study 2 and focused instead on subjectively perceived and objectively manipulated control.

with higher scores indicating greater preexisting perceptions of external control.

Several weeks later, we recruited participants by telephone for a study of "leisure time activities." Upon arrival at the laboratory, they were told that the specific activities under consideration were entertainment (watching music videos) and volunteerism (reading textbooks for the blind). It was emphasized that this volunteer activity was common on campus and that students had the opportunity to continue reading for the blind in the future if they so desired; thus, this was a true volunteer position. All participants were told that the protocol was to allow them to choose the activity they wanted to perform, to perform the activity for 30 min, and then to complete a questionnaire about their attitudes toward the activity.

However, we randomly assigned half of the participants to be told next that because of a scarcity of individuals in the volunteerism condition, they would be forced to read for the blind (mandate condition); we persuaded the other half to choose volunteerism through an induced-compliance technique (i.e., we told them that they did not have to select reading for the blind but it would really help if they did; all students agreed to volunteer in this choice condition). We then taught participants to read a textbook into a tape recorder, and they did so for 15 min.

Afterward, they completed dependent measures. As a manipulation check, students responded to several items designed to examine whether they felt controlled by our choice and mandate conditions.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, they responded to the following two items on 7-point scales: "To what extent did you freely choose to engage in today's task?" and "To what extent do you believe that you read to the blind today only because it was required of you?" (reverse scored). These two items were averaged to form a scale with higher scores indicating greater perceptions of free choice. Participants in the choice condition ( $M = 4.72$ ) were more likely to feel that they had freely chosen to read to the blind than participants in the mandate condition ( $M = 3.58$ ),  $t(61) = 3.08, p < .01$ .

Participants also responded to the following seven items designed to assess their intentions to volunteer: "How likely is it that you will engage in some form of volunteer work this quarter?" ". . . next quarter?" ". . . next summer?" ". . . in the next year?" "How likely is it that you will be a volunteer 3 years from now?" ". . . 5 years from now?" and ". . . 10 years from now?" These items were averaged to form a scale with high scores indicating greater future intentions to volunteer; this scale had excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

## Results

To investigate whether preexisting perceptions of external control moderated how the conditions of choice and mandate influenced future intentions to volunteer, we performed a median split on the external-control scale. We then performed a planned contrast to examine our hypothesis that individuals with greater perceptions of external control (i.e., those who were not prepared to volunteer freely) would respond differentially to the choice and mandate conditions, whereas individuals with lower perceptions of external control (i.e., those who were prepared to volunteer freely) would be relatively unaffected by

6. Six individuals whose scores on these items were outliers within their particular condition were eliminated from further analyses after the  $t$  test checking the manipulation.

the manipulation, as suggested by the results of Study 1. Thus, this contrast compared students who had high perceptions of external control and were forced to read to the blind (-3), students who had high perceptions of external control and chose to read to the blind (-1), students who had low perceptions of external control and were forced to read to the blind (+2), and students who had low perceptions of external control and chose volunteerism (+2).

This planned comparison was significant,  $t(53) = 2.88, p < .01$ : Mean intention to volunteer in the future was 4.04 for the high-external-control/mandate group, 4.99 for the high-external-control/choice group, 5.03 for the low-external-control/mandate group, and 5.49 for the low-external-control/choice group (Fig. 2). As expected, individuals who had higher perceived external control had lower intentions to volunteer in the future after being required than after being led to freely choose to volunteer. Individuals who had lower perceived external control (who had higher intentions overall) were relatively unaffected by the mandate versus choice conditions.<sup>7</sup>

### Discussion

The results of this experiment demonstrated not only that participants had different initial perceptions of whether it would take control to get them to volunteer or whether they would do so freely, but also that those who had different initial perceptions responded differently to mandates to serve and choices to serve. That is, participants who were more inclined against freely volunteering subsequently reported greater future intentions to volunteer when they completed service that was chosen rather than mandated. In contrast, mandates and choices seem not to have differentially affected participants who were initially inclined toward volunteering freely; regardless of the context under which their service was initiated, these individuals reported greater future intentions to volunteer than did those who were initially less likely to volunteer freely.

These results confirm the hypothesis, suggested by Study 1, that required volunteerism is more likely to reduce the intentions of those who perceive that they are being controlled than those who perceive themselves as volunteering freely. That is, compared with conditions of free choice, mandatory volunteerism does have a greater negative impact—but only on those individuals who feel less inclined to volunteer of their own free will.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

Taken together, the field study and the laboratory experiment presented here suggest that whereas earlier laboratory research found that intentions to help (in more short-term or spontaneous helping situations) were undermined by external inducements (Batson et al., 1978; Kunda & Schwartz, 1983), there may actually be important boundary conditions to this effect.

In our first study, we found that a required program undermined the relationship between past experience and future intentions only for those individuals who felt more externally controlled by the program.

7. Although it may appear that our significant contrast value is largely attributable to a main effect of perceived external control, we also performed a contrast that explicitly compared individuals with high perceived external control under conditions of mandate and choice (contrast: -1, 1, 0, 0). This contrast was also significant,  $t(53) = 2.03, p < .05$ .

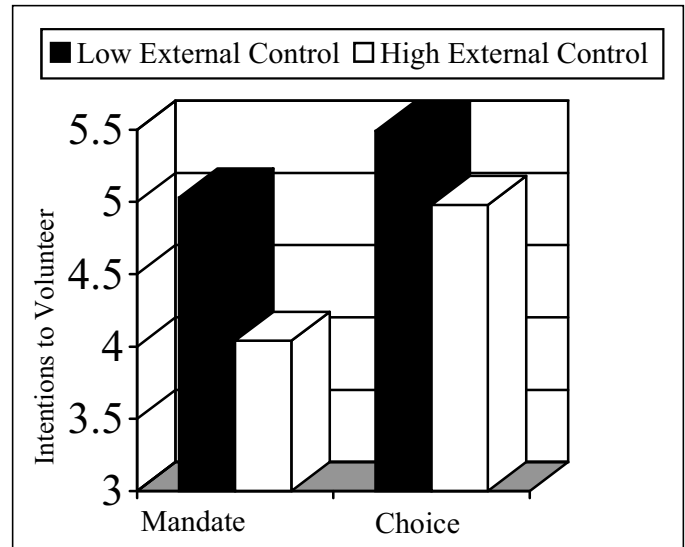


Fig. 2. Future intentions to volunteer after mandated and chosen volunteer activity as a function of perceived external control.

Students' subjective perceptions of how much a requirement controlled their behavior were a strong moderator of their reactions to the program (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1987), and stronger perceptions of external control had greater inhibiting effects on those students with the most prior volunteer experience (e.g., Lepper et al., 1973). In our second study, individuals' preexisting feelings about whether they would freely choose to volunteer or not moderated whether a requirement to volunteer (as compared with a choice) affected future intentions to volunteer. This finding, that readiness to volunteer moderated the effects of requirements and choices to volunteer, goes beyond theories about the effects of subjective perceptions of external control (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1987) to suggest that assessments individuals provide in advance can predict whether they will be negatively affected by requirements to volunteer.

Thus, given these converging results in experimental and nonexperimental investigations conducted in the laboratory and field, it may be the case that requirements to volunteer undermine the future behavioral intentions only of those individuals who currently do not feel free to volunteer (perhaps for a variety of reasons, which may involve interest or available time and resources). That is, only those individuals who would not otherwise be volunteering (Study 1) or who feel that it would take external control to get them to volunteer (Study 2) may find their future intentions undermined by a requirement to volunteer.

Perhaps such subjective assessments are viable moderators of reactions to requirements only for activities that, like volunteering, are typically planned and chosen. Indeed, few activities so overtly suggest a conceptualization of individuals as active, purposeful, and agenda setting (Snyder & Cantor, 1998; Snyder, Clary, & Stukas, in press). Planned helpfulness, as typically construed, represents a phenomenon in which the salient (external) cues for action are less demanding than the cues in short-term or emergency intervention situations, and usually involves processes that encourage people to look inward for guidance in deciding whether to get involved in helping (e.g., Clary & Snyder, 1991; Clary, Snyder, Ridge, et al., 1998; Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Snyder & Cantor, 1998; Snyder et al., in press). When the

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typically planned helpfulness of volunteerism is turned into the required helpfulness of mandatory volunteerism, individual agendas may be placed at odds with the agenda of the institution establishing the requirement. Future intentions to volunteer may depend importantly on whether individuals' personal agendas are in harmony or in conflict with the agenda behind the requirement.

The two investigations presented here demonstrate how basic theoretical research can be linked to applied and practical attempts to understand real-world social issues (Snyder, 1993). By using psychological theories about the effects of external inducements to act on future behavioral intentions, not only have we been able to advance theory (by identifying important boundary conditions), but we are also positioned to suggest possible routes for reducing the negative impact of requirements to volunteer. For example, institutions that choose to impose community-service requirements may reduce inhibiting effects by giving students a sense of freedom and autonomy in meeting their requirements. Allowing participants to design the focus and specific details of their service may effectively solve this problem; students themselves may be able to come up with the most creative ways to serve within the frameworks of their existing personal agendas. With such practical and theoretical benefits, action research on volunteerism may be beneficial both to psychological science and to society.

**Acknowledgments**—This research was supported by grants from the Gannett Foundation and the Aspen Institute's Nonprofit Research Fund to Mark Snyder and E. Gil Clary, and by grants from the National Science Foundation and National Institute of Mental Health to Mark Snyder. This article was written while Mark Snyder held the Chaire Francqui Interuniversitaire au Titre Étranger at the Université de Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium). We wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Business 200 program at the University of St. Thomas and its director, Jan Kormann, in making this research possible. We also thank Craig Hunter and Frank Condon, who served as research assistants for Study 2. Portions of this article were presented at the July 1996 meeting of the American Psychological Society in San Francisco and at the May 1998 meeting of the American Psychological Society in Washington, D.C.

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(RECEIVED 11/18/97; REVISION ACCEPTED 6/30/98)