DISASTER VOLUNTEERISM:
A UTILITARIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

It is interesting that during a major disaster that the vast majority of individuals who actively respond and seek to help are volunteers, in fact according to the American Red Cross 95% of their relief workers are volunteers. Furthermore, there exists a substantial number of volunteer organisations that facilitate the placement of individuals who have made a conscious decision to assist and give up their time for this purpose. This paper seeks to contextualise this human endeavour within the philosophical framework of 'Utilitarianism' as espoused by Mill, whose essential premise is that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote human happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. The key linkage between utilitarian theory and disaster volunteerism is the notion that there is an undertaking to promote social, economic and/or environmental reform, and that ultimately only good or happy consequences matter. It is also important to emphasise that the response to a disaster may be characterised not only by specialist and highly trained individuals, but ordinary citizens volunteering their time, knowledge, skills and resources to help others in times of crisis. The issue here is to understand disaster volunteerism within utilitarian theory. It is contended that an improved theoretical understanding of this crucial and supportive component within the disaster management industry will be associated with beneficial economic, social and environmental consequences.
Keywords: volunteerism, utilitarianism, disaster management.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to provide a more contextualised understanding from a utilitarian perspective regarding the activity of volunteerism during disaster events. What is particularly intriguing is the magnitude of the commitment made by ordinary citizens, often with little or no specific technical training or experience when volunteering at the time of a disaster. According to the Red Cross 95% of their relief workers who actively respond and seek to help are volunteers. Furthermore, the manner in which people can, and do volunteer varies greatly, with recent developments in technology facilitating what has been termed 'digital volunteerism', a pertinent example of this trend occurred when 2.3 million people volunteered and joined the search for missing Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 by scanning more than 24,000 square kilometres of satellite imagery uploaded to the Tomnod website [3].

It is argued that many of the definitions of volunteerism, especially in relation to disaster management, along with explanations for volunteer behaviour tend to be pragmatic. For example, the US Federal Emergency Management Agency [4], defines a volunteer in the context of the National Incident Management System: 'a volunteer is any individual accepted to perform services by the lead agency (which has authority to accept volunteer services) when the individual performs services without promise, expectation, or receipt of compensation for services performed'. While it is acknowledged that such a definition, and by implication its application in disaster situations reflects the necessity for organisational and operational effectiveness; however it is argued that there is also a need to place volunteerism within a relevant philosophical framework. It is the contention of this paper that utilitarianism may provide a theoretical context that allows for a reasoned and better-informed understanding of why people choose to volunteer during a disaster.

2 VOLUNTEERISM

This paper acknowledges that volunteerism has been a feature of human endeavour throughout the history of mankind, albeit exhibiting some variation in prevalence between countries due to differing socio-economic, religious and political factors [5]. According to Brindle [6], volunteering has a rich history, and is traceable in Britain at least back to medieval times, when there was a strong association between religion and ministration to the poor and sick. Estimates suggest that no fewer than 500 voluntary hospitals were established in England during the 12th and 13th centuries. If one goes even further back in time, a less appreciative view was apparent during the Tang Dynasty when emperor Wu Zong had worried about the influence of Buddhist temples in terms of volunteerism. Thus, he abrogated the temples and their welfare institutions in 845 AD [7].

The literature provides an indication that a more critical consideration of volunteerism was evident in Europe as part of medieval and renaissance ethical discourse. This is perhaps most clearly encapsulated within the Augustinian tendency to 'volunteerism' (from the Latin: 'voluntas', meaning 'will'), which is pursued in relation to both the subject and the criterion of goodness [8].

In more recent times one may broadly define volunteering to be 'any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or organisation' [6, p. 215]. It should be noted that definitive and clear definitions are challenging due to interpretations of what we understand to be freedom of choice and the fact that the incentives and rewards may be known only to volunteers (e.g. a person who volunteers out of a sense of religious or moral obligation, or to enhance their CV's).

Although depending on the event and/or reason and the time commitment made by a person there may be a need to draw a distinction between bystander interventions and volunteering. This is based on an assumption that crisis situations provide limited opportunities for the types of deliberation that are apparently necessary for volunteerism.

However, according to Snyder and Omoto [9, p. 3], emergencies and disasters '… offer little opportunity for foresight and advance planning and usually demand immediate and instantaneous responses'. A proposition supported by Whittaker et al. [2], who believe that citizen responses to emergencies and disasters are usually deliberate and constitute much more than 'bystander interventions', even when time commitment is minimal.

3 DISASTER VOLUNTEERISM

There has been considerable debate regarding a definition that relates to disasters and associated emergency scenarios. Whittaker et al. [2], also notes that definitions typically focus on volunteer activities and outcomes rather than volunteers' characteristics and motivations per se. This may be associated with a tendency by academics and researchers to use sociological theories and interpretations as a framework for these definitions.

Shalkolsky [10, p. 8], defined volunteerism as 'any act that is orientated to the direct or indirect service of some other person or thing regardless of whether or not such act serves the self-interest of the actor'. It may be reasonable to assert that this position statement was premised to some extent on the work of sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies (1855–1936) who elucidated on the differentiation between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft with its application to human social behaviour. The former term Gemeinschaft is a form of social integration one associates with a small intimate community based on personal ties, characterised by strong shared values and beliefs; while the term Gesellschaft is a rationally developed mechanistic type of social relationship characterized by impersonally contracted associations between persons [11].

Thus, according to Shalkolsky [10], due the altruistic inclination manifest in Gemeinschaft volunteerism takes four forms in disaster situations.

- Anticipated individual volunteers fulfil the general expectations of society on an individual basis, such as a doctor who comes to the aid of victims.
- Anticipated organisation volunteers are regularly associated with an organisation, such as a volunteer fire brigade or the Red Cross, and whose participation is expected and planned for.
- Spontaneous individual volunteers provide assistance as individuals, usually in the early stages of a disaster, for example in search and rescue activities.
- Spontaneous organisation volunteers place themselves at the service of an organisation only once an emergency or disaster has occurred.

These volunteers may choose to: (a) help a regular disaster organisation; (b) formally create an ad hoc organisation for dealing with the circumstances of the specific disaster; (c) use their pre-existing, non-disaster organisation for disaster work; or (d) carry out disaster-related tasks within a loose, informal network [12].

Wolensky [13], argued that volunteerism has too often been defined in altruistic terms and in relation to higher-level needs such as learning, exploration and self-actualisation, meaning that voluntary activities motivated by self-interest, egoism and power are overlooked. Wolensky regards volunteerism as 'any monetarily uncompensated, wilful action, be it spontaneous or organised, oriented toward the protection and/or restoration of symbols, interests, people, or other high priority values of a personal or group nature' [12, p. 35].

Wolensky [13], identified four types of 'post-impact' volunteerism.

- Public interest emergent volunteerism includes groups such as search and rescue crews, those who help clean up after disaster, and those who assist with shelter and housing efforts. Such volunteerism is considered altruistic due to volunteers' genuine concerns for human safety and community welfare.
- Public interest organisational volunteerism is considered communalistic as it involves regular and non-regular aid provided through emergency services, civil defence and other organisations that act in the interests of the entire community.
- Private interest emergent volunteerism involves citizen action and self-help groups that organise to protect their own interests following disaster. These groups are considered egoistic because they primarily serve members' interests.
- Private interest organisational volunteerism involves organisations such as churches, unions and clubs that provide assistance primarily to members. It is considered mutualistic because help is provided to people who share common characteristics and interests.

It is tentatively suggested that while these definitions and their theoretical underpinnings provide a sociological appreciation of disaster volunteerism, this paper tentatively seeks to provide a broader and more informed understanding regarding the activity of volunteerism during disasters from a utilitarian perspective.

4 UTILITARIANISM

There has been some limited discourse regarding a philosophical and moral theoretical interpretation of disaster volunteerism. An example includes a review by Xhu and Nagai [7], who noted that there is a sense of moral superiority in voluntary service, although they

acknowledge that there are different interpretations of the concept of morality. For example, they identify the German philosopher Kant [14], who placed a high value on humanistic self-determination and who pointed out that a "moral" could be summarized as a question of "what ought I to do" [9, p. 397]. In contrast another German philosopher Adorno [15], held a differing view of volunteerism that emphasized the societal reorganization of morality and argued that a judgment of morality or immorality was a social phenomenon. Xhu and Nagai [7], postulate that when referring to volunteerism in terms of the theoretical perspective of Kant and Adorno that moral resources can be categorized into what they describe as moral resource I, and moral resource II. The former is a self-chosen moral resource. It involves the ethical beliefs that enhance an NGO's level of confidence in its services and helps it to overcome any difficulties in defining its mission and activities. The latter is a socially recognized moral resource, that is, ethics that are well received by society. If the moral principles espoused by an NGO are socially accepted, then it will win the trust and support of the public and the government will facilitate its development.

It is suggested at this juncture that the application of utilitarian theory may provide a more robust and applicable perspective for understanding the role of volunteerism during disasters. Thus, the guilelessness of utilitarianism, as inferred by Singer [16], presents a theory aligned with individual actions and activities that are driven to achieve beneficial consequences, notably if they engender more happiness.

In his book entitled 'Utilitarianism' published in 1863 by John Stuart Mill [1], asserts that the creed, which accepts as the foundation of morals 'Utility', or the greatest-happiness 'Principle', holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote human happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. This statement where Mill refers to 'moral utility' is clearly aligned with a consequentialist approach, where by actions that result in happiness are construed to be right, while actions that result in unhappiness are wrong. We may extend this line of thinking with the arguments forwarded by Bentham [17], who contends that there is one ultimate moral principle, namely, the 'Principle of Utility'. This principle requires us to always choose whatever action or social policy would have the best consequence for everyone concerned.

The views espoused by Mill, and Bentham are taken up by Rachels [18], who seek to summarise classical utilitarianism into three propositions:

1. Actions are judged right or wrong solely by their virtue of their consequences; nothing else matters.
2. In assessing consequences, the only thing that matters is the amount of happiness or unhappiness that is created, everything else is irrelevant.
3. Each person's happiness counts the same.

To sum up the Utilitarian approach, one may be best guided by the words of one of its foremost architects John Stuart Mill [1], "The utilitarian doctrine is that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; in all things desirable as means to that end".

It is perhaps important to remember that when talking about ethics, and in this instance utilitarianism, one is talking about a theory of social relations. Thus, according to Goodin [19], injunctions of ethics are principally injunctions to do good for people, and for sentient beings more general perhaps. This begs the question, 'how far does one cast the net to do good'. It should be noted, that many volunteers feel obligated to render a service to do 'good' to those groups of people who suffered during a disaster.

However, the notion of 'common sense' may unfortunately prevail in the mind-set of both individuals and their communities with harmful consequences. Smart and Williams [20], cautions that 'common sense' cannot be trusted, as it may exhibit degrees of increasing deficiency, depending upon the historical context in which 'common sense' views are espoused, believed and acted upon. This can be clearly seen in the racist ideologies prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which unfortunately are still perpetuated in today's supposedly more enlightened world. It is argued that individuals, who use common sense as a default argument for not acknowledging, let alone volunteering to assist people and animals during a disaster is morally unacceptable.

According to Rachels [17], the inadequacy of 'common sense' may turn out to be utilitarianism's greatest contribution. The deficiencies of moral 'common sense' become obvious when these deficiencies are repeatedly and starkly expressed via value systems, perceptions and actions that on reflection are ethically moribund.

It is pertinent to recall these 'common sense' notions that dominated thinking in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, included broad based attitudes, which were largely prevalent throughout the population in Western Europe and North America that were characterised by demeaning and racist views. It is argued here that other negative and obnoxious 'common sense' views are seen in contemporary society in the treatment of migrants and other marginalised and vulnerable people.

5 CONCLUSION

One may construe the act of being a volunteer tourist in terms of what Goodin [18], describes as an act of self-sacrifice; the same author acknowledges that individuals sometimes engage in acts of self-sacrifice and further suggests that by donating hard-earned money to charitable organisations, an individual is indicating a preference that goes beyond, or even counter to that individual's hedonistic pleasures. However, satisfying those preferences, it is nonetheless a source of utility for that individual.

It is suggested that many volunteer organisations that are operating both as commercial organisations and/or NPOs, along with the volunteers who sustain them are in effect responding to the utilitarian doctrine, which according to Mill [1], espouses that "happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; in all other things being desirable only as a means to that end".

Furthermore, it is argued that mankind is becoming increasingly aware that this predilection towards utility extends beyond humans, to both sentient and non-sentient creatures, as well as to the environment, which sustains life on earth. It is therefore relevant to reassert the foundation of morals 'Utility', or the greatest-happiness 'Principle', which holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote human happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.

Volunteers have become a critical human resource for many organisations in the world. This paper has sought to develop a discourse framed within a utilitarian perspective that provides an improved understanding of the reasons and motivations that characterise the volunteerism and the organisations they serve. Thus we ought to be reminded that any discussion regarding moral obligations and ethics are essentially about a theory of social relations, and it is with this mind that the principle of utility perhaps best reflects the nature of volunteerism during disasters and emergency situations.

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