# SOCIAL ACTIVIST: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

[1] Neha Singh Maurya

## Abstract

*A variety of psychological thinkers have suggested that being socially active expresses a basic human motive necessary for well-being. For example, Alfred Adler (1938/1964) held that social interest, or a concern with fostering the welfare of others was a fundamental human striving and that expression of social interest was a prerequisite for psychological health. In support of this idea, Leak and Leak (2006) found that college students' scores on a self-report measure of social interest were positively correlated with their life satisfaction, self-esteem, self- actualization, vitality, and experiences of positive affect and negatively correlated with their psychological distress, feelings of alienation, and experiences of negative affect. Similarly, Erik Erikson's (1950) concept of generativity has much in common with political activism and social interest, for it concerns the desire to care about something bigger than the self and to foster the welfare of future generations. Although most prominent in midlife, generativity concerns were understood by Erikson as occurring throughout the life span and helping promote the healthy development of the person. Thus, generativity has been positively associated not only with political interest and activist behaviors (Peterson, Smirles, & Wentworth, 1997), but also with life satisfaction (de St. Aubin & McAdams, 1995) and other measures of psychological well-being (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002); however, studies have yet to confirm a relationship between behavioral measures of generativity and well-being (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002).*

*Keywords:  Social activist, Social Activitism, Volunteering*

## Volunteering -A Motivated Behaviour

More recent theory and research on the concepts of volunteering and community feeling aspirations similarly suggest that political activism might be motivating in and of itself, and thus benefit well-being because intrinsically motivating activities typically satisfy important psychological needs prerequisite for healthy functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996). For example, Meier and Stutzer (2008) reviewed arguments for why volunteering is often intrinsically motivating, noting that it can support prosocial desires to benefit others, that it can provide opportunities to engage in interesting, challenging tasks and be with other individuals, and that the act of helping can be inherently enjoyable. Their analyses of a large German sample showed that volunteers were more satisfied with their lives and that the loss of volunteer opportunities was associated with diminished life satisfaction. Such findings ex- tend past research demonstrating that volunteering benefits self-esteem and lowers mortality rates (Wilson, 2000). In a parallel fashion, Kasser (2002) argued that the pursuit of goals such as community feeling (or the desire to benefit the broader world) is often associated with intrinsically motivated behavior and typically creates circumstances that allow for greater psychological need satisfaction. Indeed, the higher the relative importance of community feeling goals to individuals, the more likely Klar and Kasser they report higher well-being on a variety of indices

(Carver & Baird, 1998; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Ryan et al., 1996).

Although these theories and data regarding social interest, generativity, volunteering, and community feeling aspirations concur that political activism might reflect a fundamental human motive whose expression promotes higher wellbeing, our ability to confidently reach such a conclusion is limited for at least three reasons:

- First, social interest, generativity, and volunteering have a somewhat broader scope than activism, as there are many ways one might enact them, not all of which involve social activism.
- Second, relatively little research has examined how actual behavioral manifestations, as opposed to self-reports, of these concepts affect a diverse array of well-being outcomes.
- Third, the direction of causality is hard to determine from past studies, as it may be that psychological health causes people to be more generative, socially interested, etc., and thus perhaps to engage in activism (although see Meier & Stutzer, 2008), rather than activism promoting well-being. Our studies set out to address these limits by more directly measuring the concept of activism, by examining its relationships to a variety of indicators of well-being, and, in Study 3, by experimentally manipulating activism to determine whether it might have causal effects on well-being.

1 *Research Scholar, Pacific University, Rajasthan*

Social activism provides a set of individual actions that enable adherents to take responsibility for the local and global impacts of their everyday lives and tailor them in a way that helps shape the world in accordance with their own social values. In effect, allowing them to reproduce society according to their own ideologies and interests by focusing on their individual contribution to the realm of culture. Social activism also provides a "multiple front" approach to social change rather than relying on a single social movement issue or camp to succeed and resolve the post materialist social issues important to citizens-consumers.

Both volunteering and social activism are important strategies for fostering people's participation in social change and human development. Volunteering encompasses a range of activities, including visiting to the sick, raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, planting a tree or advocating for human rights. While volunteering and social activism are sometimes viewed as separate spheres of activity, there is in fact a dynamic relationship between the two. Together, both contribute to the involvement of people in the achievement of development commitments, such as organizations, which are engaged in social awareness, education and training, Old Aged home, Eco tourism prorgamme, adventure training, Tourism development seminars, Environmental protection activities, Community Education, Health Care, Agriculture and Projects on women's empowerment, Social awareness, Environment and Sustainable Development etc.

## Volunteering Seed to Social Activism

Volunteering and social activism support each other in fostering participation by people from varied backgrounds. Volunteering can help people take their first step to long-term involvement in development. Social activism, on the other hand, plays an important role in providing leadership, defining areas for engagement and mobilizing individuals. That said social activism depends on the contributions of volunteers to effect the change it seeks.

In their commonality as well as their complementarity, volunteering and social activism help promote social inclusion by providing opportunities for marginalized groups, such as poor women, to engage in participatory development processes. Volunteers serve as important reservoirs of knowledge for development programmes and can help ensure that development-related advocacy campaigns are relevant and legitimate. By participating in volunteering or social activism, or both, people can be empowered with the confidence, skills and knowledge necessary to effect change in their world.

Volunteering, like social activism, can be purposeful and change-orientated. For example volunteering can be directed at influencing agenda-setting, policy-making, decision-making and representation. It can also promote social change by contributing to personal transformation, whereby individuals change their beliefs, perspectives and day-to-day behaviors once they have developed a new awareness or understanding about a particular situation.

## Goal to be Achieved

The goal of deepening and sustaining participation depends on creating new, diverse and varied opportunities for involvement. For example, volunteer centres can help to expand the opportunities for engagement offered to the public. Investments in good volunteer management and the recognition of volunteers can result in more impactful change. Government, civil society, the private sector and international agencies all have a role to play in fostering an enabling environment for people's participation.

Achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 depends on the participation of ordinary people in development. This paper suggests that volunteering and social activism have the potential to help foster the level and diversity of participation needed to confront the major tensions and development challenges of our time.

## Areas of Commonality between Volunteering and Social Activism

The background study shows that there are three areas of commonality between volunteering and social activism.

Firstly, they both foster opportunities for participation by people from diverse backgrounds and from a very wide range of circumstances. Furthermore, both volunteering and activism reflect a personal choice to engage in one's community and society. What is significant is that both appeal to different people, at different times, providing them with a rich array of opportunities to get involved in actions that can contribute to positive social change.

The impetus to act ranges from a desire to help others by providing for basic needs such as food, shelter and clean water, to an interest in changing policies, raising awareness and empowering disadvantaged groups. While these actions may be undertaken for a combination of reasons, altruistic as well as self-interested, what binds people together is the common desire to be active citizens − to give as well as trying to change the conditions producing human suffering.

Secondly, the background study shows that both volunteering and social activism can be purposeful and change-orientated. Some interviewees perceive social activism as a deliberate attempt to change social reality, and see volunteers as people who don't necessarily want to change the status quo. However, this shows that, like social activism, volunteering can be purposeful and change-oriented. Volunteering promotes social change not only by influencing political processes such as agenda-setting, policy-making, decision-making and representation, but also because it can change relationships between people from different parts of society.

## References

1. Adler, A. (1964). Social interest: A challenge to mankind. NewYork: Capricorn Books. (Original work published in 1938).
2. Carver, C. S., & Baird, E. (1998). The American dream revisited: Is it what you want or why you want it that matters? Psychological Science, 9 (4), 289–292.
3. De St. Aubin, E., & McAdams, D. P. (1995). The relations of generative concern and generative action to personality traits, satisfaction/happiness with life, and ego development. Journal of Adult Development, 2, 99–112.
4. Erikson, E. H. (1950). Childhood and society. New York: Norton.
5. Grossbaum, M. F., & Bates, G.W. (2002). Correlates of psychological well-being at midlife: The role of generativity, agency and communion, and narrative themes. International Journal of Behavioral Development, 26 (2), 120–127.
6. Kasser, T. (2002). Sketches for a self-determination theory of values. In E. L. Deci & R. M. Ryan(Eds.), Handbook of self-determination research (pp. 123–140). Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
7. Kasser, T., & Ryan, R. M. (1993). A dark side of the American dream: Correlates of financial success as a central life aspiration. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 65 (2), 410–422.
8. Leak, G. K., & Leak, K. C. (2006). Adlerian social interest and positive psychology: A conceptual and empirical integration. Journal of In- dividual Psychology, 62, 207–223.
9. Meier, S., & Stutzer, A. (2008). Is volunteering rewarding in itself? Economica, 75, 39–59.
10. Peterson, B. E., Smirles, K. A., & Wentworth, P. A. (1997). Generativity and authoritarianism: Implications for personality, political involvement, and parenting. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72 (5), 1202–1216.
11. Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Annual Review of Psychology, 52, 141–166.
12. Ryan, R. M., Sheldon, K. M., Kasser, T., & Deci, E. L. (1996). All goals are not created equal: An organismic perspective on the nature of goals and their regulation. In P. M. Gollwitzer & J. A. Bargh (Eds.), The psychology of action: Linking cognition and motivation to behavior (pp. 7–26). New York: Guilford Press.
13. Wilson, J. (2000). Volunteering. Annual Review of Sociology, 26, 215–240.