

Personality and Volunteering

Personality characteristics are reliably related to volunteering.

PsychologyToday.com

Author: [Art Markman Ph.D.](#)

Posted Dec 06, 2017

Many important tasks in the world are done by nonprofit organizations that engage volunteers in activities that would not make for successful businesses. Food banks feed hungry people who don't have the funds to buy food on their own. Animal shelters protect stray pets and allow them to live safely until they are adopted. Community centers plan activities for seniors who might not otherwise get to engage with other people regularly.

Without volunteers who give their time to these causes, the organizations simply wouldn't be able to serve as effectively as they do. As a result, there is a lot of interest in factors that lead people to choose to volunteer their time.

An interesting study in the December 2017 issue of [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#) by Stewart McCann explored the relationship between volunteering and personality characteristics.

The studies looked at state-by-state data in the United States. Surveys done from 2003 to 2005 have shown that different states differ in the proportion of individuals who report volunteering at least once for an organization over the course of a year. States like New York, Nevada, and Florida have relatively low rates of volunteering (around 22 percent) while states like Utah, Minnesota Iowa have relatively high rates of volunteering (around 40 percent).

What factors predict this state-by-state variation in volunteering?

Socioeconomic Status (SES) was one predictor. The higher the statewide SES, the higher the level of volunteering in that state. A second predictor was the homogeneity of the population. The higher the percentage of the population that was White (the majority culture), the higher the level of volunteerism.

This study was most interested in the relationship between personality characteristics and volunteering. The study drew from statewide surveys of the Big Five personality characteristics of people in each state. The Big Five personality characteristics are Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and

Neuroticism. The only personality characteristic reliably related to volunteering was Neuroticism.

People high in neuroticism are typically anxious and have high levels of social anxiety. They can also be depressed and emotionally unstable. In this study, states with high levels of neuroticism had lower levels of volunteering. This relationship was quite strong, explaining over 25 percent of the variability between states in volunteering.

A second study found a similar relationship between neuroticism and volunteering using surveys that looked at specific sub-populations in each state including college students, senior citizens, and people volunteering for religious and secular organizations. In each case, the higher the statewide level of neuroticism, the lower the statewide volunteering rate.

Finally, one other study looked at a variety of positive social interactions including charitable giving, attending community meetings, talking with neighbors, and participating in community groups. All of these are reliably associated with volunteering. That is, the more that people in a state talk with their neighbors, the more they tend to volunteer. Nonetheless, only statewide levels of volunteering were associated with neuroticism.

There are a few interesting aspects of these results. First, it would be easy to generate many different reasons why a variety of personality characteristics might be associated with volunteering levels in a state. It is fascinating that only neuroticism had a significant (negative) relationship with volunteering. Second, it is interesting that there are significant differences across states in personality characteristics. This reflects both ways that people interact with each other, but also choices that people make about where they will live based on their personality. These differences then lead to significant regional differences in important behaviors like volunteering.

References

McCann, S.J.H. (2017). Higher USA State resident neuroticism is associated with lower state volunteering rates. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 43(12), 1659-1674.

About the Author: Art Markman, PhD is a cognitive scientist at the University of Texas whose research spans a range of topics in the way people think.