Greetings,

Earlier this year you participated in a study about volunteering with refugees and said that you would be interested in hearing about the results. We appreciate your help with our research and we are happy to tell you about the findings. The study was conducted by Brenda Martin under the supervision of Dr Winnifred Louis. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3346 9515, by emailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, McElwain Building, University of Queensland, St Lucia, QLD 4072. You can also read about other studies that we’ve done on Australian social attitudes at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: VOLUNTEERING WITH REFUGEES

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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR

The aim of the study was to investigate volunteers’ intentions to continue volunteering with refugees and what factors might influence volunteer retention. We wanted to see if people’s attitudes towards refugees as a group would influence their willingness to continue helping a specific aid recipient. Whilst past research has focused on volunteers’ personality traits and motivations, we expected that volunteers’ attitudes toward the target group would also have an impact.

Secondly, we explored how the behaviour of the aid recipient might also influence volunteers’ intentions to continue helping. Based on past research showing the link between “spurned helping” and burn out in helping professionals, we expected that volunteers faced with an ungrateful refugee reaction would be more likely to drop out of volunteering. We also expected that an ungrateful reaction would have more impact on a volunteer’s intentions if the volunteer had less favourable attitudes towards refugees to begin with.

Finally, we examined whether attitudes towards refugees as a group were linked to preferences for giving dependency-oriented help (e.g., doing something for someone) or empowering styles of help (e.g., teaching them how to do it themselves). Past research has shown that when people have less favourable opinions of a target group they will prefer offering dependency-oriented help.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS

From May to July 2007, 183 participants completed this study. Participants were either first year psychology students from UQ participating for course credit (16.4%) or volunteers and activists, recruited through emailing community groups and networks (83.6%). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 71 years, with an average of 32 years. The majority (73.4%) of participants were female and 85.8% identified as Anglo-Australian.

WHAT WE FOUND

In this study, we first measured people’s attitudes to refugees, and then everyone read a scenario about an interaction in which they were a volunteer who was working with a refugee. For half the participants, the scenario described them giving dependency oriented help (e.g., speaking to clerks on behalf of the aid recipient). For the other half, the scenario described empowering styles of help (e.g., helping the refugee practice their English). Within each group, half of the scenarios described the refugee reacting gratefully (e.g., thanking you as a volunteer) and the other half described an ungrateful reaction. Finally, we measured attitudes to the individual aid recipient, stereotypes about the warmth and competence of refugees as a group, and intentions to go on volunteering in the scenario.
1. ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES. Overall, participants had positive attitudes towards refugees. The majority of participants disagreed with such statements as “the religion of refugees is not compatible with the Australian way of life” and rated refugees as a group as relatively positive and competent. As expected, attitudes towards refugees as a group were related to intentions to continue volunteering. Participants with more favourable attitudes towards refugees in general were more willing to continue volunteering with the specific individual in the hypothetical scenario.

2. REFUGEE BEHAVIOUR. As expected, the behaviour of the refugee had a very strong influence on the volunteers’ attitudes and intentions. Specifically, we found that after reading about an ungrateful refugee volunteers had less favourable opinions towards refugees as a group and lower intentions to continue volunteering. We also found that participants with less favourable attitudes towards refugees to begin with were more strongly influenced by the behaviour of the aid recipient.

3. HELP TYPE. Whilst we had expected participants with more favourable attitudes towards refugees to prefer the empowering help, we did not actually find any consistent effects at all.

SUMMARY. Taken together, the results provide evidence that intentions to continue volunteering are linked to both attitudes towards the target group in general and the particular experiences of the volunteer when working with an individual aid recipient. For us, this is important because it suggests that social factors, such as media portrayal of refugees, may have an impact on volunteer recruitment and retention. We also found that a single negative experience with a member of the target group may impact on a volunteer’s attitudes toward the entire group and decrease their intentions to continue volunteering. This was especially so when the volunteer’s original attitudes were less favourable to begin with. On the other hand, volunteers with very positive opinions about refugees as a group were less likely to let the behaviour of an individual refugee alter their attitudes towards the group as a whole. Very little work has looked at the interactions between volunteers and refugees, or the role that prejudice plays in those interactions, so we are interested in continuing this line of work. In addition, the study is being followed up in the coming semester to increase the number of student participants and compare findings between the student and volunteer groups.

THANKS AGAIN…

So that’s a description of what we found in this study. If you have any questions or would like a copy of the longer write up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for you participation and interest!