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Volunteering for Human Service Provisions: Lessons from Italy and the U.S.A.

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Abstract

The increased reliance on volunteers in all industrialized democracies has been paralleled by growing fiscal crises in most states, widespread criticism of welfare, and increased demand for social services. While volunteer work is presumed to be an alternative to public services, its feasibility is not yet clear. We suggest that a cross-national comparison of two significantly different countries would provide more information about volunteerism as a partial substitute for public services. We compared the United States where volunteerism is a widespread tradition and Italy where there has been a "rediscovery" of volunteerism since the 1980s.

Differences between the two countries in the practice of volunteerism are examined from several perspectives. They include the relationships between volunteers and the statutory sector, the professionalization of volunteer activity, the role of citizen participation in a capitalistic society, and the Lockean principle of limited government. Finally, we conclude that while there are many differences in welfare provision between the United States and Italy, they do have a common element: increased reliance on volunteers for every aspect of day-to-day life; however, this reliance is mostly ideologically-based and may prove unfounded and costly.

Keywords

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Comments

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VOLUNTEERING FOR HUMAN SERVICE PROVISIONS:
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(Accepted 6 February 1997)

ABSTRACT. The increased reliance on volunteers in all industrialized democracies has been paralleled by growing fiscal crises in most states, widespread criticism of welfare, and increased demand for social services. While volunteer work is presumed to be an alternative to public services, its feasibility is not yet clear. We suggest that a cross-national comparison of two significantly different countries would provide more information about volunteerism as a partial substitute for public services. We compared the United States where volunteerism is a widespread tradition and Italy where there has been a "rediscovery" of volunteerism since the 1980s.

Differences between the two countries in the practice of volunteerism are examined from several perspectives. They include the relationships between volunteers and the statutory sector, the professionalization of volunteer activity, the role of citizen participation in a capitalistic society, and the Lockean principle of limited government. Finally, we conclude that while there are many differences in welfare provision between the United States and Italy, they do have a common element: increased reliance on volunteers for every aspect of day-to-day life; however, this reliance is mostly ideologically-based and may prove unfounded and costly.

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INTRODUCTION

Volunteerism, defined as a social phenomenon of unpaid care and citizen participation in society, is highly regarded in all parts of the world. Volunteerism is viewed as both a means and an expression of a democratic society. Democratic societies value freedom of choice, the opportunity to make one's own decisions, quest for space and for uniqueness, belief in self-actualization, and drive for success. Volunteerism in that respect provides people with opportunities for individual choice, and the success that volunteering offers increases one's self-actualization (Baldock, 1983; Brudney, 1990; Qureshi, Challis and Davies, 1989; Thornton, 1991; Vellekoop-Baldock, 1990; Wuthnow, 1991). It is in this way that volunteers all over

the world practice their freedom of choice by assisting others though they are neither required to do so nor penalized if they do not.

Volunteering creates a series of communal processes. It enables people who do not know one another to meet, fosters a feeling of belonging, encourages common interests to mushroom, and creates a chain of commitments. The basic bonds among members of a given community, whether it be a geographical community or community of interest, are based on mutual support and volunteer assistance (Putnam, 1993). Wuthnow (1991) noted that “when someone shows compassion to a stranger, it does set in motion a series of relationships that spreads throughout the entire society” (p. 300).

Before discussing volunteers, we should address the origin of this term. Although “volunteer” is currently used across a wide range of settings to denote unpaid and uncoerced service, the term still lacks a clear and coherent definition (Cnaan and Amroffell, 1994; Cnaan, Handy and Wadsworth, 1996). In attempting to understand the meaning of the term volunteer, we use two of the most frequently cited definitions. Smith (1982) defined a volunteer as:

An individual engaging in behavior that is not bio-socially determined (e.g., eating, sleeping), nor economically necessitated (e.g., paid work, housework, home repair), nor sociopolitically compelled (e.g., paying one’s taxes, clothing oneself before appearing in public), but rather that is essentially (primarily) motivated by the expectation of psychic benefits of some kind as a result of activities that have a market value greater than any remuneration received for such activities (p. 25).

Ellis and Noyes (1990) define volunteering more narrowly: “To volunteer is to choose to act in recognition of a need, with an attitude of social responsibility and without concern for monetary profit, going beyond one’s basic obligations” (p. 4).

While these definitions are broad, they have five elements in common: (1) free choice; (2) unpaid service (not monetary donation); (3) a formal commitment to assist (i.e., excluding informal familial or neighborly support); (4) the volunteer is not the intended beneficiary of the service, and (5) an action of deliberated (as opposed to spontaneous) nature. Cnaan and Amroffell (1994) noted that the scope of volunteerism is almost as large as that of paid work, yet our understanding of its composition and variation is very limited. Volunteers can serve as board members of a prestigious international organization, or they can visit homebound frail elderly providing them with attention and everyday services like bathing or shopping.

In this article we limit our analysis to the above four criteria and acknowledge that we include a wide array of volunteers.

Worldwide trends noted in the 1980s, as a result of the Reagan and Bush administrations as well as the Thatcher government in England and other conservative leaders in Europe, indicate that many human service organizations (HSOs) will face budgetary constraints in the 1990s and into the next century. These constraints reflect a worldwide conservative political philosophy in which public involvement in human problems is sharply curtailed. The pressures faced by HSOs are further accentuated by the widening range of human needs which are placing demands on already limited human resources. These trends have led to the view that volunteerism in various forms must be encouraged as one mechanism for meeting human needs (Brudney, 1989; Cnaan, 1990; Schilling, Schinke and Weatherly, 1988). It is often argued that volunteers enable administrators to not only sustain current services but also expand both the quantity and diversity of services without exhausting the agency's resources. Some services were originated by volunteers long before the public or private sectors began to acknowledge that needs existed. Such were the cases of services geared to meet women needs (Metzendorf and Cnaan, 1992; Perlmutter, 1996) and services for people with AIDS (Chambre, 1991).

What is unclear is the real capability of volunteers to fill the gap created by support for social services. Volunteers can be very effective in a variety of roles and settings, yet the volunteer pool itself is limited. Thus, one key question for HSOs is *whether there is a sufficient supply of volunteers to assist in meeting human needs*.

This trend of increased reliance on volunteers is not limited to the United States. What may be unique about the United States is the extent and frequency of volunteerism. Volunteering to assist HSOs is a well-documented tradition in America (Cnaan, 1991; Hayghe, 1991; Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1992; Wuthnow, 1991). It is not surprising then that most scholarly work on volunteers is produced in the United States and focuses on American volunteers. While studies on volunteers have been conducted in many contexts and societies, there have been few cross-cultural studies. In Italy, for example, formal volunteering is a newer social phenomenon and occurs less frequently (Ascoli, 1992; Pasquinelli, 1993). In this respect, contrast-

ing volunteerism in the United States and Italy should shed light on the meaning of volunteerism from a cross-cultural perspective. This raises another key question: *to what extent can volunteers in countries, other than the United States, be relied upon to provide social services that are not provided by the public or private sectors?* In this paper, we strive to answer these two key questions by comparing volunteerism in Italy and the United States.

The paper moves now to the methods we used to answer these questions and then we present the history and background of volunteering in Italy and the United States separately. Data on volunteering are also presented by country. In the final section we discuss what can be learned from a comparison of these two countries.

METHODS

Cross-cultural comparisons are, by nature, problematic. Although the same term may be used in different countries, the meanings may differ. For example, Weisbrod and Mauser (1990) attempted to study the legal definition and tax status of nonprofit organizations in eleven countries. Their key conclusion, however, was that the term “nonprofit organization” meant something different in each of the countries, and that any comparison would be descriptive at best.

We realized that it was impossible to compare Italy and the United States accurately in terms of the role and composition of volunteers. What we attempted to do, therefore, was to describe and present data from which some preliminary generalizations might be drawn and that would enable us to answer our two research questions.

In this paper we first review the history and role of volunteerism in each country and assess the effect of volunteerism on service and society. We then present data on the scope of current volunteerism in Italy and the United States, including the number of volunteers, number of hours volunteered, those most likely to volunteer (based on the variables gender, age, education, religion, and size of locality of residence), and the types of service fields most likely to use volunteers (such as hospitals, schools, nursing homes, museums, political parties, and trade unions). We also provide local data on the role of HSO volunteers in each country. Finally, we discuss volunteerism as a means to provide social services, compare volunteering in Italy

and the United States, and draw conclusions that may be applicable to other countries.

We obtained our material from IREF-Eurisko (Istituto di Ricerche Educative e Formative) and from the Independent Sector findings on *Giving and Volunteering in the U.S.* (1992). The Independent Sector is a nonprofit organization that was established in the United States to encourage volunteerism and nonprofit activity. It had specialized, through the years, in measuring the scope and impact of voluntary action and it coordinates activities in this field. It is the largest organization of its kind and it holds annual conferences on research on voluntary action and nonprofit organizations. In addition, we used data from our own regional research projects; Ancona, Italy and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (U.S.A.). Thus, our data were applied to national and regional samples, the latter of which included interviews and lists of HSOs using volunteers. We then used more in-depth data on regional volunteering at HSOs in Italy and the United States.

A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

To understand whether volunteers can adequately supply social services in Italy and the United States, we first examined the history and sociology of volunteerism in these countries. Our analysis also identified key differences which we used in our comparison of volunteerism in Italy and the United States.

Volunteering in the U.S.A.: A National Perspective

Volunteerism has been associated with American society since the arrival of the first settlers who quickly learned that survival in the new world depended upon mutual support (Ellis and Noyes, 1990). Moreover, given the dominance of the Lockean principle in the United States, government has been eternally suspect, and citizen involvement has been the expected norm. Duncombe (1985) noted that “for more than 300 years, Americans have relied on volunteers for thousands of unpaid but essential tasks. Colonial communities used volunteers as night watchmen, firemen, militia, and for other types of work” (p. 356). Adams (1987) observed what he characterized as the “American imperative to volunteer,” namely that volunteerism

is a both a norm and a value in the American society. In this respect Karl (1984) noted:

The volunteer had taken on something of the same function as the national forests, a living symbol of a lost past, to be preserved in a kind of protected purity to remind future generations of essential values whose potential loss could be seen as a real threat to the maintenance of necessary values (p. 515).

While volunteerism is associated with non-profit organizations, many public and for-profit organizations also use volunteers (Brudney, 1990; Duncombe, 1985). Furthermore, many educational programs teach elementary, middle, and high school students to view volunteerism as a worthy and desired activity (Ellis, Weisbord and Noyes, 1991; Mizenko and Smith, 1991). In more and more institutions of higher education, volunteerism can be substituted for academic credit (Bojar, 1989; Cooley, Singer and Irvin, 1989; Redfering and Biasco, 1982). In addition, Congress has implemented President Clinton's community service program, which provides students with partial tuition coverage in exchange for volunteer work. Despite arguments that this program is not a true volunteer program because of the tuition rebate, and despite threats of the current Republican Congress to cut the program, the community service program is still in operation.

Over the past two decades in the United States, the field of volunteer administration has emerged. Administrators of volunteer programs across settings that range from hospitals to social welfare agencies and from libraries to museums, have developed their expertise and sought to elevate the status of the volunteer movement (Ellis and Noyes, 1990; Naylor, 1985). Volunteer administrators are employees whose sole responsibility is the management of volunteer programs. This includes planning and designing volunteer jobs as well as recruiting, training, placing, supervising, retaining, and if needed, terminating volunteers. In a national survey of volunteer programs, Smith and Berns (1981) found that 63 percent had a full-time volunteer coordinator, 18 percent a part-time volunteer coordinator, and only 17 percent had no coordinator. Data were not presented for the remaining 2 percent. In other studies, Stubblefield and Miles (1986) and Brudney (1992) found 675 and 754 respondents respectively, who indicated they were full-time salaried volunteer coordinators. They also found that many agencies employed more

than one volunteer coordinator. Respondents in both studies reported that volunteer programs enjoyed high status in their agency. Many of the volunteer coordinators also reported long-term commitment to their work and membership in the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA), an international organization that provides formal certification and educational programs in volunteer management and supervision.

Currently, the United States has many programs that recruit older volunteers. These programs are supported in large part by the Older Americans Volunteer Programs of ACTION, a federal volunteer agency established in 1971 and include the Foster Grandparent Program (FGP), the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), the federally-funded Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), and the Senior Companion Program (SCP) (Bowles, 1976; Chambre, 1987). All of these are linkage programs which connect elderly volunteers with organizations that require their skills. The SCP program provides companionship to homebound or institutionalized adults with the goals of preventing institutionalization for the former and encouraging successful deinstitutionalization for the latter (Bowles, 1976). SCP requires that volunteers acquire significant skills and knowledge through training. Both FGP and SCP provide stipends and fringe benefits (sick leave, vacation and insurance coverage) as incentives to encourage the participation of low-income elderly people. Although it provides neither a stipend nor fringe benefits, the RSVP program is by far the most widespread, with programs in all fifty states (Booz, Allen & Hamilton, 1985). In addition to the federal programs, many local organizations have adjusted their programs to include elderly volunteers (Seguin and O'Brien, 1976; Newman, Vasudev and Onawola, 1985; Ozawa and Morrow-Howell, 1988). In addition, some states have initiated a barter system whereby retirees who volunteer to assist the frail elderly accumulate service credit for personal future consumption (Cahn, 1990; Morrow-Howell, 1989).

Finally, many corporations have established service programs, and employees are expected to volunteer time to these programs to better the community. These corporate-volunteer programs indicate the corporation's commitment to society. The motivation to volunteer in such programs is questionable; that is, do the employees volunteer

willingly or out of concern for their jobs? However, most employees take this expectation to volunteer seriously and engage in community service (Forward, 1994).

Volunteering in Italy: A National Perspective

Most indicative of the role of volunteering in Italy is that the term 'volunteer' gained wide currency only during the 1980s. The only volunteers known previously had been Red Cross volunteers who had an international reputation. There is also evidence that until the 1980s, the term 'volunteer' was used primarily to describe Italian people who chose to avoid being called for compulsory military service. Italy had to wait for a framework law in 1991 (Law N° 266) that defines volunteering. In brief, volunteering was considered to be spontaneous in nature and an unpaid activity, except for reimbursing expenses (Article 2) and payment of insurance against accidents and illness arising out of the performance of this work, that holds civil responsibility against third parties (Article 4).

Informal volunteering within and outside the Catholic church is very common in Italy. What is uncommon is helping strangers (those who are not relatives, friends or neighbors), through the organized effort of a formal organization. In Italy, at the end of the 1970s, interest in the role of voluntary action within the sphere of social policy began to rise. In the 1980s, conventions and debates surrounding social and political forces flourished. Initial studies were published, either as local field studies (Ascoli, 1988a; Bianchi and Ceresa, 1985; Comune di Modena, 1987; Ranci, 1985; Scortegagna, 1985) or as national surveys (Rossi and Colozzi, 1985). It should be noted that almost all analyses of voluntary action were connected to the crisis of the welfare state, especially its fiscal crisis.

Volunteering was embraced in Italy during the 1980s. From that point on, every area of social policy has been marked by an awareness of the need to find new ways for public institutions and organizations in the 'third sector' to collaborate. There are inevitably some who see this collaboration as a way to begin privatizing the Welfare State. However, there are also those who believe if the public sector had a different role – one in which it reduced its provision of direct services and worked collaboratively with nonprofit organizations – the government-third sector collaboration could be a major tool

of social engineering in the redesigning of the welfare system. It could also create a situation in which more people are provided with social assistance and where opportunities for “social citizenship” are increased.

At the same time, as particular events have taken place in the social policy field, it has been possible to observe an increase in the level of dynamism in civil society. This has been allied to an acceleration in the irreversible crisis of ideologies and of traditional points of reference. In Italy, it has been possible to discern a growth of social associationism and the involvement of volunteers in a large number of activities. A new era of social organization has opened, one in which public institutions cannot be expected to solve every problem; on the contrary, there is a need to encourage, promote, and support nonprofit, nonpublic sector collective institutions and volunteer work as much as possible. These institutions need to establish themselves socially useful targets and take advantage of ordinary citizens’ economically disinterested voluntary work.

It is noteworthy that the “framework law,” approved in Italy in 1991, made it possible to link public institutions with volunteer organizations that provide socially useful services. This legislation has not only promoted the culture of volunteering but also obliged regional governments to pass related laws to create a ‘mix’ of social policies appropriate to the social circumstances and geographical areas in question.

Clearly, volunteering is an important activity for many Italians of all ages and occupations despite a bias towards the middle class. Volunteering also embraces a wide range of activities that are considered to be of high economic and social value. Italian society could do without volunteering only if it were prepared to see a substantial drop in the quality of life in many socially significant areas.

DATA FROM NATIONAL SURVEYS

As previously noted, volunteering in the United States is an historic phenomenon that became a cultural norm, whereas volunteering in Italy is a more recent phenomenon that has yet to achieve such status. Nevertheless, it is important to know the number and types of volunteers available in each society, because it is they who can best complement the work of HSOs in meeting people’s needs.

Volunteering in the U.S.A.: Data from National Surveys

National statistics on volunteering come, for the most part, from the biannual studies commissioned by the Independent Sector and carried out by the Gallup Organization. An interesting finding is that results of these studies have remained consistent over time despite minor fluctuations. Based on the Independent Sector's definition of volunteering as helping a person or a cause, more than half of the adult population volunteers to assist others in a given year (Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1992). On the average, each volunteer provides 4.2 hours of service a week. One sixth of the adult American population (13.6%) can be described as *committed volunteers*; that is, they provide, on the average, more than 5 hours of service a week. It is estimated that formal and informal volunteering accounted for 20.5 billion hours of service in 1991. This volunteer service was equivalent to approximately 10 million paid full-time positions, with an estimated worth of \$176 billion. Fischer, Mueller and Cooper (1991), in a review of the literature, found that estimates of volunteering by the senior adult population in 1991 ranged from 16 percent to 55 percent.

We also obtained data from supplementary questions to the May 1989 Current Population Survey, which defined volunteers as persons who did unpaid work for organizations such as schools, hospitals, and civic organizations. These data yielded different results. According to Hayghe (1991), one of every five (20.4%) people, aged 16 years and over in the civilian noninstitutional population, had volunteered. This lower estimate reflects several methodological biases, namely the narrow definition of the term volunteer, the collection of data from family members rather than from the subjects themselves, and the phrasing of the research questions. It should be noted that Hayghe (1991: 19), in a special methodological page, gave the Independent Sector credit for their accuracy in measuring volunteering in the United States. Hayghe attributed his low results to these methodological flaws and assessed volunteerism to be at the magnitude reported by the Independent Sector.

According to these national surveys, volunteers in the United States are almost evenly distributed among men and women. Generally, American volunteers tend to be employed, ages 35–44, married, white, with a post high school education, and religiously affiliated.

However, people of higher socioeconomic status (SES) have a greater representation in the volunteer pool (Cnaan and Cwikel, 1992; Frisch and Gerrard, 1981; Pearce, 1983; Sundeen, 1990). According to many studies, the higher the educational level, the higher the probability that a person will volunteer and will remain a volunteer for a longer time (Lammers, 1991; Sundeen, 1988; Tomeh, 1973). It should be noted that although these studies identified who is more likely to volunteer, they did not determine whether these same individuals are more interested in volunteering or are more frequently asked to volunteer (Schervish and Havens, 1994). Thus, the relationships between those likely to volunteer and those who actually volunteer is unclear. However, the study that higher education and more prestigious occupations are correlated with higher quality of volunteer work has found some support (Burke and Hall, 1986). In sum, these findings are in line with the dominant statuses approach that argues that volunteers are, by and large, members of elite groups (Lemon, Paisleys and Jacobson, 1972; Smith, 1994).

Important as it is to know who is most likely to volunteer, it is also important to know the areas in which volunteers are most likely to serve. As seen in Table I, the key areas attracting American volunteers are religious organizations (mostly congregations), informal (which is not the focus of this study), education, youth development, and human services. According to Hodgkinson and Weitzman (1992), the activities most frequently performed by volunteers are: assisting a needy person, baby-sitting, serving as a committee member, teaching or tutoring, being a youth group leader or aide, and doing religious work.

Volunteering in Italy: Data from National Surveys¹

As can be seen in Table II, in the period 1983–1991, the number of volunteers in Italy rose from 3,260,000 to 5,481,000, an increase of 60 percent. These numbers represented 10.7 percent of people, aged 18 to 74 years, in 1983 and 13.6 percent in 1991. Following a period of substantial expansion, this growth trend came to a halt in the late 1980s. In fact, in 1994 the number of volunteers aged 18–74 years old was very close to that of 1991: 13.3 percent. This very small decline from 1991 indicates that the 15.4 percent recorded in 1989 was a one time record. It should be noted these numbers are low even

TABLE I
 Percentage of volunteers by activity area: The United States

Activity area	Independent sector (N = 1,365)	Current population survey (N = 38,042)
Arts, culture, and humanities	4.1%	
Education	10.1%	15.1
Environment	5.6%	
Health	8.4%	10.4
Human services	8.0%	9.9
Informal	15.4%	N/A
International, foreign	1.5%	
Other area of volunteer activity	1.8%	
Political organizations	3.1%	13.2 (includes civic groups)
Private and community foundations	1.5%	
Public and societal benefit	4.2%	
Recreational – adults	4.4%	7.8 (includes sports)
Religious organizations	17.6%	37.4
Work-related organizations	4.6%	
Youth development	9.7%	
Other	9.7%	6.3

by European standards (Volunteer Centre, 1994). On average, each person provided 6 hours of service a week in 1991. It is estimated that formal and informal volunteering accounted for 1.7 billion hours of service in 1991. This volunteer service was equivalent to 843,000 paid full-time positions.

A sociodemographic profile of Italian volunteers (data not shown in table) in the early 1990s would show more men volunteering than women; aged between 25 and 54; unmarried; with an average-to-high level of education (usually a high school diploma); medium-to-high or high income; and people living in North-Central Italy (the most economically developed areas) or in towns with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants. There would also be greater participation among students; entrepreneurs, employees and the self-employed; and those who regularly attend religious services.

TABLE II
People in Italy aged between 18 and 74 who carry out volunteer work by field of activity

Field of activity(*)	1983	1985	1989	1991	1994	Differences ±	
						(1989-91)	(1983-91) (1991-1994)
Individual basis	11	8	11	17	15	+6	+6
Informal groups	13	26	21	21	26	0	+8
Formal groups/societies	68	66	68	61	59	-7	-7
Other	8	-	-	1	-	+1	-7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	-	-
Percentage of volunteers	(10.7)	(11.7)	(15.4)	(13.6)	(13.3)		
Number of respondents	3,260,000	4,547,000	6,135,000	5,381,000	5,373,000		

Source: IREF, 1995: 48.

However, if we consider only volunteers in the social welfare field (data not shown in table), the demographic profile changes in two ways. First, there are more women than men; second, there are more people aged 55 and over. This means that more pensioners and housewives are found among volunteers in the social services. IREF (1993) stated the following:

A summary of the characteristics of volunteers operating in the social welfare area shows there are as many men as there are women; they are both young and old; they have high, or medium to high, incomes; they have a very high standard of education; they are usually in employed work, and if not, they are pensioners or housewives; they live in the South or (to a lesser extent) in the North-West; and they live in medium-sized towns and cities (p. 110).

In Italy, both the fields of volunteer activity and the organization of the work itself have changed. On the one hand, volunteerism has increased in the social affairs field (70% in 1983; 81% in 1991), as distinct from party politics (19% and 13% respectively) and trade union work (11% and 6% respectively), the latter being in steep decline. On the other hand, the number of people performing volunteer work informally to assist neighbors or relatives is on the increase. When comparing the last two surveys (1989 and 1991), the number of volunteers in informal community groups remains stable, while the number of volunteers in formal organizations is slowly declining.

If we categorize Italian volunteering under two headings, civic and social welfare, we find that, for the period 1983–1994, volunteerism in social welfare work showed a steady growth trend from 4.7% in 1983 to 7.88% in 1991 and a pause in growth in 1994 (7.3%); whereas volunteerism of people aged 17–84 in civic work showed a slight reverse or pause in growth from 7.7% in 1983 to 11.51 in 1989, and 11.01% in 1991, and a growth to 14.6% in 1994. More volunteers are involved in civic work than in social welfare work. Of 100 volunteers interviewed in 1991, 81 said they did civic work, and 58 said they did social welfare work. This means that many were simultaneously engaged in a wide range of activities (IREF, 1993: 99). The types of activities most often reported are, in descending order: education provided by religious groups, sport, politics, recreation, emergency services, and Third World aid (including activities for social purposes, culture, ecology, pacifism, consumer and user protection, and vocational guidance). Trade union activity is in serious decline.

In social welfare volunteering nearly all activities, except child care, are on the increase. Activities most favored by volunteers are, in descending order: care of the elderly, care of the handicapped, giving blood (although this is in decline), and care of the sick. The number of volunteers engaged in activities in different fields is also on the decline. This might be referred to as the “pluralizing of volunteer activities.”

In addition to the national censuses we have cited, survey research from the 1980s is worth close examination. With one exception, these surveys were conducted in coordination with studies of social services and welfare policies. The exception is the national survey of 1983 which the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance (Ministero del Lavoro e della Previdenza) used to examine volunteer organizations throughout the country (Rossi-Colozzi, 1985). This survey is not considered a national-level census, because it did not examine volunteerism in toto or attempt to construct a representative sample. The Uffici del Collocamento e della Massima Occupazione (Public Job Centers), which are within the Ministry of Labour and located throughout the country, collected quantitative and qualitative data on volunteering organizations, friendly societies, and volunteer groups. Although many local groups (N = 7024) were interviewed, it would have required twice that number to cover the entire sector. Furthermore, since 1983, when this study was conducted, a widespread network of organized volunteering has sprung up throughout the country, with a slight preponderance in the more developed and more affluent Northern regions over the Southern regions.

The Northern regions have the biggest concentrations of volunteers. This fact cannot be divorced from the region's social, political, and cultural circumstances. First, with the exception of Rome, these areas do not have major urban concentrations. A comparison of the number of volunteers and the size of the towns/cities in which they work shows that towns/cities with a population of under 500,000 have one volunteer for every 36 inhabitants, whereas large cities have one volunteer for every 119. Second, these areas have powerful, deep-seated Catholic (in the North-Eastern regions) and Socialist (in the Central regions) cultures which have been nurturing enormous organizational networks, independent of civil society for over a century. These range from the leagues of day-laborers (*braccianti*)

to the pious works of the Catholic Church; from workers' mutual aid societies to cooperatives. These regions are also notable for the marked resilience of their local communities. Even industrialization, which caused a rapid growth in the number of small- and medium-sized firms and led to economic development, has not affected the social fabric. Similarly, areas with high levels of volunteering are relatively stable with only a minimal increase in emigration and urbanization.

FINDINGS FROM LOCAL STUDIES

National statistics for Italy and the United States do not provide the full picture in terms of volunteers who will supplement public social services. These statistics include volunteering to religious institutions (including local congregations), informal helpers, political organizations, and work-related activities. We, therefore, considered it important to review some local studies that focused specifically on volunteers in HSOs in addition to the national data.

Volunteers in Human Social Services in the U.S.A.: Findings from a Local Study

As shown in Table III, results from the Independent Sector's biannual surveys showed fluctuations in areas of volunteering associated with social services. Our analysis of these fluctuations in three consecutive studies (1988, 1990, and 1992) showed several trends. A most notable change is in the percentage of people reporting being "aide/assistant to paid employee." This decline (from 7.6% in 1990 to 2.5% in 1992) may be a methodological error, but it may also indicate that more people are volunteering independently or are being assigned tasks to be carried out independently. Other trends included the decline in the percentage of people assisting in blood collection and the increase in those serving as a teacher or a tutor.

In addition to the data obtained from the Independent Sector's biannual surveys, we also used data from a study on consistent volunteers in human services (see for example, Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen, 1991). This study was not random and did not attempt to represent the wider population. The study examined a specific group of people who, in the past six months, had volunteered at least one hour every

TABLE III
Human social service volunteering in the United States by field of service
(in percentages)

Area of human social service	1988	1990	1992
Assisting the elderly, handicapped, social service recipients, or homeless (not as part of an organization or a group)	7.7	7.3	6.0
Baby-sitting (not as part of an organization or a group)	5.9	3.3	5.1
Assistant at blood bank or blood donation station	1.2	0.4	0.3
Hospital volunteer or assistant at nursing home	2.4	0.9	0.8
Visiting nurse	0.4	0.1	0.1
Coach, director, or recreational volunteer	3.3	2.1	3.2
Teacher or tutor (not as aide to paid employee)	3.5	2.6	4.6
Youth group leader or aide	3.3	3.1	4.8
Community coordinator	1.2	0.6	0.9
Counselor (Big Brother/Big Sister, substance abuse prevention)	0.9	1.1	1.0
Social service counselor	0.6	0.8	0.8
Aide/assistant to paid employee	6.2	7.6	2.5
Unpaid blood donor	—	—	0.4
Percentage of the population reporting volunteering in each year	45.3	54.4	54.1

other week to work with clients in an HSO. Thus, informal volunteers, ad-hoc volunteers, board members, and volunteers who did office, political, and cleaning work were not included. This non-random group consisted of 510 volunteers (on the problem of aggregating too many types of volunteers, see Cnaan and Amroffell, 1994) who support formal human social services in the United States.

This study found that people of all ages are likely to volunteer in HSOs. More women than men volunteered for activities traditionally considered as women's work. As shown in Table IV, characteristics of consistent volunteers in human social services differ significantly from those of the overall volunteer population. Clearly more women than men volunteer in HSOs, a possible reflection of the traditional gender roles that may be preserved in the domain (Baldock, 1983). There is a large group of low-income people who volunteer, many of them retirees and students, but there are also people in the 31–60 age group. This suggests that more low- and moderate-income people

are likely to volunteer in HSOs than in other settings. The sample also had a large representation of people aged 60 years and over. However, this finding was less reflective of HSO volunteers and more reflective of the study's objective, namely, to learn more about volunteers in this age group. Finally, given the inclusion criteria which were based on continuous hours, it was not surprising that the percentage of those employed full-time was lower than that reported for the overall volunteer population (25.3%).

Volunteers in Human Social Services in Italy: Findings from Local Studies

In recent years, the dramatic growth of the Italian fiscal crisis and necessity of cut-backs in social welfare expenditures have created strong incentives toward privatization. According to many scholars and observers, national social policy in the future will increasingly rely on volunteers and voluntary organizations. Therefore, the search for knowledge about nonprofit organizations has taken on a new urgency, and Italian social scientists have begun to research volunteerism in Italy's welfare system (Ascoli, 1988).

By 1983, volunteering in Italy was on the rise. In fact, more than half of the groups interviewed (54.4%) reported an increase in the number of volunteers over the previous three years. Since then, there has been research on social welfare volunteering in several towns and cities in the North Central section of Italy. A survey was also carried out in the Southern regions, but it was not representative.

Based on a series of local studies, we can conclude that local volunteer characteristics are both varied and specific (see Table V). Volunteers are mostly employed, have a high standard of education, and are evenly distributed among the genders. Although not shown in the table, caring for the handicapped, the elderly, the sick, and hospital in-patients are volunteers' most common activities. A large number of organizations and groups provide training for volunteers. On average, two out of five organizations surveyed train their own volunteers.

TABLE IV

Characteristics of consistent volunteers in human social services
in three locations in Eastern United States. (N = 510)

Characteristics	Percent
Age:	
15–30	27.9
31–60	31.6
61+	40.5
Gender:	
Males	28.9
Females	71.1
Marital status:	
Single	18.4
Married	40.5
Divorced/separated/widowed	41.1
Education:	
Less than high school	13.3
High school	20.4
Post high school	16.7
College completed +	49.6
Race:	
Caucasian	82.2
Other	17.8
Household yearly income	
0–10,000	20.9
10,001–20,000	17.5
20,001–30,000	14.6
30,001–40,000	11.4
40,001–50,000	9.1
50,001+	26.5
Employment status	
Full-time employed	25.3
Not employed/employed part-time	18.2
Housewives/students	23.5
Retirees	33.0
Religion	
Catholics	37.9
Protestants	32.6
Jews	16.2
Other	13.2

TABLE V

Demographic background of volunteers: Comparative analysis of five Italian areas
(in percentages)

	Reggio Emilia (1988)	Piacenza (1988)	Modena (1984)	Milan (1988)	South (1983)
Sex					
– Male	51	63	58	22	44
– Female	49	37	42	78	56
Age					
– Up to 30	27	42	48	22	24
– 31–60	64	36	34	55	57
– Over 60	9	22	18	23	19
Education					
– Lower middle school certificate	52	29	–	24	22
– Upper middle school certificate	36	56	–	67	42
– Degree	13	15	–	19	36
Position in the labour market					
– Employed	53	31	49	38	48
– Pensioners	16	14	8	16	9
– Students	14	26	22	11	12
– Housewives	14	23	20	35	15
– Unemployed	3	6	1	–	16
Number of volunteers	4288	285	5363	363	800

Source: Ranci-De Ambrogio-Pasquinelli, 1991: 59

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have attempted to answer two key questions: (1) are there enough volunteers to be relied upon to provide social services not provided by the public or private sectors; and (2) can volunteers in countries other than the United States be relied upon to provide similar services? In doing so, we found that the literature on volunteers yielded few cross-cultural studies. We proposed to fill the void with data from the United States and Italy. We first traced the

historical, sociopolitical, and cultural background of volunteering in Italy and the United States. We then discussed the norms and values which stress mutual aid and social responsibility and their effect on volunteering.

Data in both countries indicate that volunteering has reached a plateau, and there has been little fluctuation in the number of volunteers over the past five years. However, there are also some indications of decline, especially in the United States. For example, only 47.7% of adults in the United States volunteered in 1993 (Hodgkinson, Gorski, Noga and Knauft, 1995; Stehle, 1995). Thus, it can be argued that volunteering has reached its full capacity in substituting for public and private services. In light of this finding, increased political pressure in both the United States and Italy to have volunteers take over public services is quite unrealistic and dangerous.

Those who expect volunteers to carry out public responsibilities not only assume that volunteers can shift from their current complementary role to that of major social service providers, but also assume that volunteers and volunteer organizations want to replace the public or private sectors. As the data show, the supply of volunteers in both countries is a scarce resource (Wineburg, 1995). Conservative politicians who seek to dismantle public social services may still be able to do so, but the so-called volunteer-substitute is, to a large extent, a political hoax (Salamon, 1995).

Furthermore, we found only a small percentage of volunteers who serve more than five hours a week. In other words, it takes the work of many volunteers to equal the work of one paid employee. Volunteers also tend to serve where they choose, not necessarily where they are needed. The large percentage of Italian and American volunteers engaged in religious, political, or work-related volunteering indicates that the additional (un tapped) volunteer pool available to take over social services is much smaller than would be presumed, given the relatively large number of volunteers in each country.

Our findings also suggest that volunteering in Italy differs from that in the United States, and what may hold true in one country may not be applicable to the other. In Italy, less than one seventh of the population formally define themselves as a volunteer. Thus, volunteering is not a fully socially accepted norm, but rather a rela-

tively new social phenomenon, low even by European standards, and one which already is showing signs of stabilization and decline. Italians volunteer only after making a special personal decision, a decision that may not be supported by the local social norms. It is clearly not opposed to by local norms, but there is no sense of social expectation to enhance one's inclination to volunteer. For Americans, the decision to volunteer is easier and, to some extent, less individual. The reason is that when nearly half of the adult population reports that they engage in a volunteer activity (as in the United States), to volunteer is more to comply with a social norm than to act individually. This is especially so for those of the middle and upper classes. When people are called to volunteer by presidents, both from the left (Kennedy and Clinton) and the right (Reagan and Bush) of the political spectrum, students are encouraged to volunteer by schools and colleges, and volunteer administration is a rising profession, then volunteering is an expected behavior that requires no explanation. Yet, as Wuthnow (1991) pointed out, the decision as to where to volunteer, what work to do, and how many hours to give are individual decisions. Volunteerism as a social institution in Italy, however, is still evolving and struggling, so its future is still uncertain. According to Perlmutter (1991):

Although the role of third sector is gradually increasing, it is unlikely that the third sector will come to play a very significant part in Italian society. The voluntary sector is still too strongly identified with the church and the weak liberal tradition to make the universalistic claims that would free it from its present marginal status (pp. 179, 182).

The Italian legal framework for volunteer work is still inadequate (Borzaga, 1993). Only a 1991 law has created new possibilities for a partnership between government and voluntary organizations in the provision of human services. At the same time, many responsibilities have already been shifted to voluntary organizations. Certainly, a key issue for the future will be the size and the quality of volunteer involvement.

Because Italy has no public programs for the training of volunteers either at the central or regional government levels, the impetus for training must come from individual organizations. This makes the specializing and professionalizing of volunteers an important and delicate problem, given the increase in the number of tasks that Italian third sector organizations are, and will be, called upon to

perform. In the United States, such roles are not expected from the government. However, the United States is coming from centuries of volunteerism and nongovernmental tradition and activities; Italy, on the other hand, is much more government-oriented, and the relinquishment of services and responsibilities by government is a much greater threat and challenge than the one taking place currently in the United States.

An important issue for both Italy and the United States is the extent to which individual volunteers and volunteer organizations will participate in planning the shift of the social burden. For example, they could be invited to join with the government in planning a form of collective intervention that would respond more efficiently to needs and broaden the range of clients. Such a step, however, would demand not only a clearly defined political will, but also a new culture of services within the public sector. It would also require a qualitative leap on the part of volunteer organizations who would not only need to give their volunteers professional specialized skills but also assume the role of "public agent."

In Italy, the danger is that the "rediscovery" of volunteerism and the growth during the 1980s of an effective voluntary sector may be used as a reason to dismantle the welfare state. However, overloading volunteer organizations with too many responsibilities, just when it has become stable, could mean that precious potential in social and civil growth would be squandered and social distinctions and inequalities would be aggravated.

The incidence and prevalence of volunteering in the United States is open for debate. The findings of the Independent Sector indicate that 50 percent of the American adult population volunteer. Other studies with different, and more restrictive definitions, indicate lower levels of volunteering. Nevertheless, it is clear that volunteerism is well established in the United States. A capitalist society in which anti-government sentiments are high and taxes are relatively low needs a substitute mechanism for maintaining the fabric of social life (Cnaan, 1996). This substitute is the voluntary sector as a whole and individual volunteering in particular. Many functions performed in other countries by paid public employees, such as fire fighters or youth counsellors, are often performed by volunteers in the United States. Many social service organizations are also supported by

volunteers who do not take the place of professionals, but save HSOs time and expense by being in contact with clients, providing services for them, and assisting to preserve the clients' quality of life. In other instances, new services are initiated by groups of concerned and caring volunteers.

If a lesson can be drawn from the American experience where volunteering is much more frequent and volunteers function both as service providers and as policy makers, it is that the voluntary sector cannot compensate for cuts in the national social services budgets. This was made evident when, in the 1980s, the Reagan and Bush administrations asked volunteers and voluntary organizations to assume a major role in social service delivery as a means of lowering taxes. Although lower taxes and small government were well accepted by the public, the social impact was enormous. Many services were no longer provided to needy people. Homelessness reached an epidemic proportions. Those with diseases such as AIDS had no place to turn, and social isolation and disintegration increased (Salamon, 1993). Thus, important as volunteerism and voluntary action are to a democratic society, they have neither the strength nor the resources to be the key social service provider. If Italy is to learn from America's failed attempt to cut public social services by using volunteers, it should also consider the fact that in the United States many volunteers assist government services (libraries, schools, hospitals, prisons, and forest services) – an uncommon phenomenon in Italy.

This study raises many methodological as well as conceptual questions. Issues of definitions, measurement, and sampling preclude more advanced cross-cultural comparisons. Issues such as volunteers' role in society, laws concerning volunteers, societal attitudes towards volunteering, religious influences on volunteering, economic effects of and on volunteering, and volunteers' contribution to democracy and civil society from a cross-cultural perspective are still unanswered. In this study, we paved the way for future studies of volunteerism in other countries which should include better methodologies so that more questions may be answered. Despite these caveats, what this study has shown is that volunteers cannot and should not substitute for the role of government and that volun-

teers role vis-a-vis government is distinctly different in Italy and the United States.

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NOTE

¹ All data mentioned in this section come from five national surveys (censuses) on the Italian population 18–74 years old carried out in 1983, 1985, 1989, 1991, and 1994 by IREF (Institute for Research in Educational and Vocational Activities)

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