

# Continued Commitment or Disengagement? Roles and Goals in Volunteer Service in a Jewish Community Center\*

PEARL B. COHEN, PH.D.

*Assistant Professor, West Virginia University, School of Social Work, Morgantown*

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**H**IGHLY motivated, capable volunteers can be utilized to advantage in Jewish community centers, but sometimes are not because of the costs involved in recruitment, training and supervision, and this cost increases when the volunteer turn-over rate is high. Other, perhaps more critical, costs may be incurred when an initially enthusiastic, dedicated volunteer experiences disappointment and frustration in the role. Then the volunteer's apathy and disengagement, or irritation and negativism, may have an adverse impact on other volunteers or community center clients and the program or Center as a whole may be undeservedly denigrated.

Volunteer service is often designed for not only the client's benefit but the volunteer's. However, if the experience is not a satisfying one, the volunteer may end up with a negative self-evaluation of his capabilities and strengths.

Despite these hazards, the use of volunteers seems desirable. Their services may be vital during periods of budget crunches and the lives of many volunteers are often significantly enriched by the experience. The hazards outlined above should, however, suggest the need for developing methods of preventing both disappointment in the vol-

unteer's experience and the resulting disengagement on the volunteer's part.

## **The Disengagement Phenomenon**

Disengagement has been observed in situations which fail to provide a challenge. Naylor,<sup>1</sup> for example, spoke of volunteers who perceived themselves as underutilized, that is, they felt exploited because they viewed their assignments as not significantly utilizing their talents or abilities. On the other hand, John Lewis, former head of the federal volunteer agency ACTION and an alumnus of the 1960's movement to desegregate Southern lunch counters, has observed disengagement occurring when the situation was too challenging, i.e. when the volunteer's illusions about producing change confronted the cold reality of the situation. Lewis spoke of volunteer students who came South in the 1960's determined to change Mississippi quickly. When the desired change failed to rapidly materialize, the students "could not take it" and became "burned out and embittered."<sup>2</sup> Note that in both types of situations disengagement occurred; those in which the challenge was too little, and those in which it was too great. What both situations have in common is a thwarting of

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the volunteers' earlier images of the significant roles they would play. In much the same vein, Pines and Maslach,<sup>3</sup> in studying human service professionals, have found disengagement occurring in situations in which client criticism and hostility have spoiled the workers' anticipated images of themselves as concerned caregivers ministering to appreciative recipients.

Disengaged human service volunteers may also be much like the disengaged professionals Cherniss observed who experienced a poor fit between their job-related goals and the demands and rewards of their specific jobs.<sup>4</sup> Cherniss cited case studies of social activist professionals motivated primarily by their need to bring about social and institutional change, who found themselves in settings in which work demands did not allow such fulfillment. Likewise, he found that workers who primarily delighted in, and anticipated experiencing, a continually expanding sense of job mastery and competence, became detached from their jobs once they found it provided little opportunity for continual skill development.

If Cherniss is correct, and his thesis applicable to volunteers, and the saying "one man's meat is another's poison" is valid, then it appears that whatever rewards an assignment seems potentially to offer the volunteer (self-expression, prestige, opportunities to produce change in society or selected individuals, and so on) these rewards must be relevant to the volunteer and realistically available in the assignment. If not, the volunteer may become disengaged and may eventually resign, if he can do so gracefully.

### **The Research Setting**

An opportunity both to test hypotheses relevant to the prevention and control of disengagement in volunteers and

to observe this process in some, but not all volunteers, presented itself when the author participated in a comprehensive evaluation of a big brother-big sister program in a Jewish community center. In the program observed, program goals were sufficiently lacking in specificity as to permit a variety of interpretations of their future roles and goals by the newly recruited volunteers. While this lack of specificity may have served as a stimulus for the volunteers' initially enthusiastic participation, the stimulus backfired in a significant number of cases.

It was hypothesized that a volunteer's failure either to play the role anticipated or to subsequently see anticipated goals as achievable would lead to disengagement, and the volunteer's personality characteristics would be associated with his choice of roles and goals, if these were not sufficiently specific in the program.

Twenty teen volunteers acting as big brothers or sisters to elementary school-aged youngsters from single parent homes served as subjects. Nineteen teens responded to three questionnaires administered over a six-month period which began shortly after they joined the program, while one teen responded only to the last two questionnaires. The teens were primarily required to see their youngsters for several hours at a time approximately weekly and to participate with them in any mutually enjoyable, wholesome activity such as a visit to the zoo, indoor and outdoor sports or games, shopping, hiking, and "rap sessions." The goal clearly was to produce positive changes in the children, but the nature and extent of such changes were never clarified.

The study's findings can best be comprehended if the following dimensions of the scene are considered:

(1) The teens' initially believed, possibly as an outgrowth of recruitment ef-

forts, that they would be working with "problem," highly deviant children because the youngsters came from single-parent homes. In reality, at most, only one-third of the children appeared to display moderate to serious emotional, social or academic problems.

(2) The teens generally were among the most academically successful, active and popular students in their high school, and many had been recruited on this basis. Their past successes in achieving difficult goals may have initially made some optimistic in respect to achieving changes in the children which they considered desirable. After meeting the youngsters, one teen indicated he wanted to produce "a more stable child," another "a more outgoing child," a third a "less precocious, intellectually preoccupied child who would be more interested in sports." Some teens saw their role as providing "moral lessons," while for another it was "constructive criticism." As the teens generally viewed themselves as popular, sensitive, and understanding, they tended to expect the children to relate well to them and to form the close relationships they believed to be conducive to change.

(3) The goals sometimes articulated by the program staff seemed to the researchers to be centered around producing an idealized child. Past program "successes," in which the youngsters had made enormous strides as a presumed result of a teen's influence, were held up as models of the possible.

(4) While a vague therapeutic goal lay behind the close anticipated teen-child relationship and the teens' activities, only a very few mothers thought their children needed a therapeutic relationship. Most mothers (there was only one single-parent father) had urged their youngsters to join the program to have someone available to provide activities the mothers themselves had little time for or interest in. The parents saw

themselves as, thus, securing a bit more personal free time while the often intense single parent-child relationship and the child's total dependence on the single-parent would be ameliorated. The teens were also seen by the parents as providing some compensation for the lack of consistent concern of absent fathers. The children themselves did not appear either to want a therapeutic relationship or to be thought of as in any way deviant. They seemed primarily to wish to be liked and provided refreshments and "good times."

In summary, the teens were in a program with the goal of producing positive but unspecific and possibly unrealistic changes in the youngsters. This goal was, by and large, not supported by either parents or youngsters. Strategies for teen program recruitment and commitment had supported, possibly shaped, the expectations of some teens for dramatic changes in their youngsters by indicating the possibility of such changes. The stage seemed set for disengagement when many teens subsequently saw little change or failed even to observe the formation of a close relationship which was generally held necessary for such change. Some teens also observed that their youngsters had serious problems (e.g. mental retardation or longstanding academic failure), problems they subsequently felt were hardly amenable to their efforts. Other teens observed that their children seemed "fine" as they were, thus negating earlier perceptions of the roles they would plan in the achievement of significant goals.

#### **Self-Assurance and Disengagement**

It had been hypothesized that the more self-assured a teen felt at Time 1 (T1), when he first joined the program, the greater the likelihood that the teen would show indications of disengage-

ment four months later, at Time 2 (T2). This association was hypothesized because it was felt that the greater one's self-assurance, the greater the likelihood that success had been achieved in most past endeavors and thus the greater the likelihood that one would anticipate success in achieving present goals. However, in this program the goal was a difficult one to achieve, one of changing a child through limited contact with him. Also, the researchers felt that the greater the self-assurance, the more likely the teen's specific objectives would be of a grandiose, less achievable nature.

Teen self-assurance was measured by 38 indicators of positive self-descriptors such as "fun to be with," "a steady worker," "good at a lot of things" and negative self-descriptors such as "moody," "the type whose feelings are easily hurt," and "at loose ends."

The extent of disengagement was defined at Times 2 and 3 as the total number of the following feelings the teen admitted having: (1) feeling the big brother or sister role was more of a duty than fun or interesting (53% at T2 felt this way); (2) feeling like a baby-sitter (47% at T2 agreed—this was a common expression of dislike of the role); (3) not knowing how one was doing and needing feedback (37% agreed with this presumed indicator of a failure to experience a sense of achievement); (4) not feeling needed or appreciated (16% agreed); and (5) not feeling close to the youngster (10% agreed). The last two questions were assumed to be indicators of not getting to "first base" in changing the children by first forming a close relationship.

As hypothesized, it was found that the greater the teen's initial self-assurance, the greater the indication of disengagement four months after the program season began ( $N = 19, r = .55, p < .01$ ). Forty-two percent of the teens at

T2 had moderate to high levels of disengagement, that is, two or more of the five indicators of disengagement were elicited.

### Role and Goal Expectations

At T1, the teens were asked how important each of the six following reasons for becoming big brothers or sisters had been: 1) seeing what being in the parenting role was like; 2) being the kind of big brother/sister they never had; 3) liking younger children; 4) wanting challenge and responsibility; 5) relating to their career goals; 6) a way of getting acquainted with the Jewish community center.

A desire "to see what being in the parenting role was like" was considered by the researchers to be the only role expectation listed that was unrealistic as it implied greater autonomy and responsibility than warranted by a role of surrogate "teen big brother or sister." Male teens who expressed a wish to "parent," a role that neither the children's own parents or the children themselves thought the teens should play, tended to experience higher degrees of disengagement four months later ( $n = 10, r = .65, p < .05$ ). Disengagement was not associated with the parenting wish in female teens possibly because the females, in general, did not tend to view themselves as replacing an absent parent of their own sex as all but one mother was in the home, while nearly all fathers were absent. Serving a fatherless home seemed more important to the males than to the females as evidenced by 73% of females approving the opening of the program to intact families versus only 33% of males.

In response to the question "What in general do you expect the program to do for your "little brother or sister?," some teens indicated their expectation the program would provide the child

with some form of understanding, support, help or security. We considered this a realistic goal and found that teens who had this goal showed a slight tendency to subsequently avoid disengagement ( $N = 19, r = .34, p < .10$ ). This tendency to avoid disengagement was especially pronounced (and statistically significant) in male teens ( $n = 10, r = .55, p < .05$ ). On the other hand, at T3, the teens were asked to rate thirteen program goals as to their importance. As hypothesized, teens who failed to see the importance of three goals the researchers considered realistic and appropriate (providing the child with social contacts, group or other activities) were significantly more likely to experience disengagement ( $N = 20, r = .38, p < .05$ ).

#### **Rationalizing Failure by Blaming Clients and Program Staff**

The staff spoke of changing the children in some positive ways. Inquiry at the season's end as to the extent to which the teen felt his association with the child had produced change, revealed that the higher the disengagement score, the less the teen felt he had produced change ( $N = 20, r = -.44, p < .03$ ). The teens who were least likely to maintain they had positively affected their little brothers or sisters may have felt this way either because of their emotional disengagement from their children or because they initially expected to produce substantial changes and the small changes they had felt responsible for seemed inconsequential.

Feelings of boredom were not found to be associated with disengagement. The increasing level of disengagement during the season, most pronounced in male teens, apparently resulted from an increase in the teens' perceptions over time that their relationships with their

children were not close ones (11% felt this way at T2, 30% at T3).

Teens who midway in the season had moderate or high levels of disengagement tended at the season's end to respond "yes," they were "disappointed" and "disillusioned" with the program staff ( $N = 20, r = .49, p < .01$ ). They did not overtly blame the children for their disappointment. However, in a sense, those who became disengaged did tend to blame the children. There was little difference among the teens at T1 in number of problems each teen observed in the child assigned. Later in the season, however, (statistically controlling for initial problem perception), there was a marginally significant association, (revealed through partial correlation analysis), in disengagement and the perception of the number of problems in their children ( $N = 20, r = .35, p < .07$ ). On a scale of 0 to 5, teens who would become disengaged had initially seen only an average of .08 more problems in their children than the other teens, but the disengaged later perceived an average of .63 more problems. Thus, those who would become disengaged initially viewed their children as hardly any more of a problem than the other teens but when disengaged they viewed their little brothers and sisters more negatively than others. They may well have attributed their perception of failure to produce change as in part their children's fault because the children had so many problems, although they were reluctant to blame small children openly and could only overtly express antagonism towards the staff.

#### **Reduced Client Contact**

Disengaged male teens tended to reduce the number of visits with their children while other male teens did not do so ( $n = 10, r = .76, p < .01$ ). Disengaged female teens, however, showed

no greater tendency to reduce contact with their "little sisters" than other female teens.

The average disengagement score in females was essentially the same at the season's end as it had been at mid-season. (The average female disengagement score was 1.7 at T2 and 1.6 at T3,  $n = 10$ ,  $r = .93$ ). Many of the male teens fluctuated in their levels of disengagement ( $n = 10$ ,  $r = .17$ ) but over all as the season progressed, the males tended to become increasingly disengaged (T2 mean = 1.4, T3 mean = 1.9) and this was primarily a reflection of their growing perception that they were not close to their children.

### Social Support

The tendency of disengaged males a) to see their children less frequently at the same time as disengaged females were not reducing their contact and b) to deepen their disengagement may have resulted from the failure of the male volunteers to discuss the program with each other and reevaluate their roles and goals. The males, unlike the females, appeared to do little mutual problem solving and to offer each other little support, possibly because unlike the females they had not, in general, been close friends prior to joining the program. One disengaged female described her feelings and the mutual problem solving which had occurred when the girls met together.

I thought I'd be helping a kid. I was pretty idealistic. The staff gave me the idea the kids would change miraculously. Yet you can't really change a kid seeing him once a week. First I thought it was me. I didn't have rapport. Then I could see the kid had no problems needing change. Then I saw another Big Sister that had a kid needing change and she was trying hard to change the kid—but it was such a lost cause. . . . At one teen meeting [all girls] this became clear to me. . . . You know I don't even know what the goal of this program is. I

don't know what I'm trying to achieve and I can't measure my success if I don't have goals.

### Resistance to Learning

There was some suggestion that disengagement was associated with some rigidity and resistance to change and a lack of interest in the type of learning which could conceivably have modified role and goal expectations. Initially the teens made the unwarranted assumption their youngsters would have many problems because they came from single-parent homes. At the season's end, the teens were asked whether they thought next's year's volunteers should be taught something about single-parent families in general. Disengaged teens, particularly male disengaged teens, were significantly less likely to appreciate the need for such information ( $N = 20$ ,  $r = -.52$ ,  $p < .01$  all teens, and  $n = 10$ ,  $r = -.70$ ,  $p < .01$ , male teens).

### Discussion

This study focused on disengagement in volunteers, a process which led to continued participation by the once enthusiastic volunteer out of a sense of obligation with little or no accompaniment of pleasure, personal sense of achievement or perception of being appreciated either by clients or others in the situation. The findings suggest that disengagement may occur when the volunteer's view of his roles and goals are not held by others in the situation who are critical to their achievement. In the program observed, the "father" role assumed by some male volunteers was supported by neither the little children nor their mothers. Nor did volunteers who wished to play a therapeutic role, which went much beyond a supportive relationship or the provision of added opportunities for the child's social and recreational enjoyments, receive en-

couragement from the little children or their parents.

The disengagement observed in this study apparently resulted from the program's failure to provide clear, specific, realistic expectations for the volunteer's role and goal. This failure, it is suggested, may have an especially negative impact on volunteers who characteristically choose lofty goals, particularly when there is some hint of the possibility of their attainment, as provided here in staff efforts at recruitment and maintenance of the volunteer's interest. Highly self-assured workers were most likely to become disengaged apparently when they later became aware of the difficulty in changing the children assigned to them in accord with their own notions of meaningful change.

The findings, therefore, suggest that, at least for some volunteers, disengagement may be prevented by the program's clarity in specifying realistic, attainable volunteer goals coupled with the volunteers' initial understanding and agreement in pursuing such goals, however limited. When this has not been done, or when, despite its accomplishment, the meshing of program and volunteer expectations is not a good one, some of the negative effects of volunteer disengagement, such as fewer contacts with clients, may possibly be prevented by the volunteers' periodic reassessment

of their goals. The female subjects of this study did this.

When a relatively few volunteers in a setting disengage, it would seem appropriate to focus on the volunteers' personality characteristics, such as high achievement orientation, which may have led to disengagement. However, when a significant proportion of volunteers disengage or there is a high turnover rate, it may be wise to reassess whether goals for the volunteers are clear, specific and realistic and have been well communicated and agreed to by the volunteers. As only a relatively small number of subjects, all young volunteers, was observed here, it is suggested that similar possible determinants of volunteer disengagement be explored in larger samples of older volunteers assigned varying responsibilities in community centers.

### References

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