

Perceived Altruism

A Neglected Factor in Initial Intervention

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Perceived altruism, an attitude that clients may attribute to those who work with them, was examined in a qualitative and quantitative study about the impact of volunteers in drop-in centers for youth at risk in Israel. Data were collected by interviews, observations, case studies, and questionnaires. The results show that the volunteers' unique contribution affected the service as a whole. The beneficiaries knew that volunteers were servicing them, perceived volunteers as true altruists, were satisfied to the degree of preferring their services over that of paid workers, and were positively affected by the encounter with volunteering. A significant impact was that volunteers set a living example of the possibility of human goodness via personal encounters and demonstrated the existence of a responsive society with mutual, unconditional caring. These results exhibit practical implications for innovative interventions with youth at risk and illustrate the significance of the psychology of goodness.

Keywords: *altruism; drop-in center; goodness; volunteers; youth at risk*

Perceived altruism is a basic selfless attitude that clients may attribute to those providing initial intervention (Ronel, 2006). In community science's quest for improved intervention methods for various populations (Wandersman, 2003), such as "hard to reach" youth at risk, perceived altruism is a recently discovered component of initial intervention; therefore, knowledge on this topic is scarce in the literature

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and current research. As a result, our study, which analyzed the impact of perceived altruism on volunteers' work with youth, is a pioneering one. The goal was to describe and understand the value of assigning volunteers to a community program, namely, a network of drop-in centers for youth at risk. It may join the growing field of studies demonstrating the impact of positive experiences (Gable & Haidt, 2005), with emphasis on the effect of goodness, as well as implications for theory and practice.

It is quite common for marginalized populations to refrain from using services operated by the establishment (Rosenfeld & Sykes, 2000). Accordingly, adolescents in distress rarely seek help from human services. This is a result of their sense of alienation and vulnerability, and it stems from their distrust of such services, often on the basis of bad experiences (Molnar, Shade, Kral, Booth, & Watters, 1998). Accordingly, in an intensive, two-phase evaluation study of the national network of drop-in centers for youth at risk in Israel, which is the subject of this study, the majority of youth claimed to seek help from their peers rather than from adults and adult professionals (Kahan-Strawczynski & Ronel, 2000; Zaslavski, Gefen, Ronel, Kahan-Strawczynski, & Sikron, 2002).

In the centers, however, they did ask for help. These youth, who came to the centers on their own initiative or with friends, are mostly normative youth, but many of them are at some risk (substance use, running away, etc.). Furthermore, those at risk tend more to come back to the centers, where they are looking for personal counseling. For example, whereas 7.5% of the youth who were first attending the centers asked for assistance for their substance abuse, 10.9% did so when they came back; for problems with the law, 1.4% and 6.8%, respectively; and for being a victim of physical or sexual abuse, 2.5% and 4.1%, respectively (Kahan-Strawczynski & Ronel, 2000; Zaslavski et al., 2002).

These findings support the centers' claim for being an identifying service that provides initial intervention for youth at risk, those who normally get no help at all. The ability of the center to be a meaningful place of contact for these adolescents and to provide them with some preventive counseling meets the center's goals, and it measures such success in this way (Kahan-Strawczynski & Ronel, 2000; Zaslavski et al., 2002).

The creation of personal relationships between youth and adults in the larger community is considered to be a central element of adolescent development (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005). The relationships with prosocial adults were found to support the adaptation of youth into shared norms and to assist them in playing significant social roles within their local communities. Such supportive relationships can provide protective and developmental alternatives (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005). Hence, a major aim of community youth work is to construct positive relationships between adults and youth that can encourage the growth of the latter in various ways (Krueger, 2005). Youth work should create a unique microcosm where adults and youth can experience a mutual relationship (Zeldin et al., 2005), and it should facilitate experiences of connection, discovery, and empowerment (Krueger, 2005).

According to the principles of humanistic psychology and social work, a necessary condition for successful intervention is that youth should experience empathy and positive attitudes directed toward them (Lietaer, 1993; Rogers, 1957; Ruthven, 1992; Sheafor & Horejsi, 2006). Therefore, to facilitate interventions with youth at risk, a population difficult to access, the requirement is a service that can offer unique non-institutionalized encounters without any condition of reciprocity while forfeiting the practitioner's control over the process (Rosenfeld & Sykes, 2000). One approach that may meet these conditions is the assignment of nonprofessional human service workers, both as paid workers and as volunteers (Durlak, 1979; Katan & Etgar, 1998). Correspondingly, there is a growing tendency to utilize citizen participation to promote social change in various programs (Kauffman & Poulin, 1994).

In a recent study of volunteers in welfare organizations in Ireland, MacNeela (n.d.) concluded that "volunteers were described as bringing something special to the organization, involving the helping/giving ethos" (p. 146); that is, employing volunteers in a service ipso facto brings in the value of altruism. Likewise, the results of a qualitative pilot study on the impact of volunteers in an outreach service that seeks adolescents and youth on the street suggest that the clients perceive volunteers to be purely altruistic, whether this is the case or not (Ronel, 2006). Thus, this quality is called *perceived altruism*.

As a focus of study, altruism usually falls into the conflict between those who perceive it as being rooted in selfish motives (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Khalil, 2004) and those who perceive it as an authentic experience (Batson, Ahmad, Lishner, & Tsang, 2002; Clohesy, 2000). Regardless of the motivation of volunteers, perceived altruism is the attribution of a quality of authentic, non-ego-based, helpful, well-intended motivation to an act or to a person. The evaluation of the role that perceived altruism accomplishes within a human service is therefore a study of the impact of goodness (perceived goodness, at least) on community life.

Existing knowledge about volunteers in the human services has focused mainly on the volunteers themselves: who a volunteer is (Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996; Handy et al., 2000; Shure, 1991; Smith, 1981), what the motivation is (Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996; Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991), what the rewards are (Cnaan & Amroffell, 1994), what the satisfaction is (Field & Johnson, 1993), what the rates of retention and turnover are (Blake & Jefferson, 1992; Cnaan & Cascio, 1999; Cyr & Doerick, 1991), and what the effectiveness is (Golden, 1991).

The influence of volunteering usually refers to the volunteers themselves (and the benefits they may gain) but not to their beneficiaries (Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988; Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998; Moore & Allen, 1996; Schondel, Boehm, Rose, & Marlowe, 1995). When Edwards, Mooney, and Heald (2001) examined who is being served by the volunteers, they focused on the community and on the organizations, not on individuals. Therefore, we can conclude that there is still a marked lacuna in our knowledge of the special impact that volunteers, as those who symbolize altruism and good intentions, have on those whom they help.

The current study, part of a more extensive research carried out on volunteers and volunteering, targeted the added value of volunteers in a national network of drop-in centers for youth at risk in Israel. Our aims were to explore the unique qualities that volunteering brings into the relationships with youth at risk and to study its impact on the youth. ELEM, a third-sector nonprofit organization, operates a national network of drop-in centers for youth at risk in Israel, in the process intensively employing volunteers as field workers and as members of its management. The drop-in centers are located throughout Israel, in major cities as well as in small and relatively remote towns. They operate as coffee houses where youngsters can drop in with no requirements, to socialize, to get information on various issues that are relevant to their lives (relationships with parents, romantic and sexual issues, etc.), and if they so wish, to receive initial counseling and a referral to an appropriate welfare agency. In fact, they can also become volunteers in these same centers.

Method

Our methodology combined qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis to create an integrative method that is relationship centered (Langhout, 2003). This paradigm helped us to explore the meaning attributed to volunteers by the various groups of participants, and it further opened up unanticipated research questions. However, because we could not interview the clients of the service directly—only observe their encounter within the centers—we asked them to fill in quantitative questionnaires. These findings enabled us to validate the qualitative results and to study the quantitative correlations between various qualitative variables. Using the combination of both methods constructed a rich and holistic understanding (Langhout, 2003), which likely produced a wider knowledge than that of either alone (Tebes, 2005).

Following the qualitative method of participatory research, which enhances the quality of research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Reason, 1994; Wandersman, 2003), the paid employees and a few of the veteran volunteers in the centers participated in the planning of the study, in data collection, and in providing meaningful data themselves. Their inclusion created an extended community of research (Brodsky et al., 2004) and provided a point of view from within, not just from without. Because the reality of the centers is constructed in part by the staff and is inherent to them, it was better studied with their inclusion in the broader research community (Montero, 2002). Rethinking this paradigm, we regret that more volunteers were not involved in this process.

Participants

The research was held simultaneously in seven drop-in centers throughout Israel, one of which acted as a pilot, where we preliminarily tested our various research tools. The selected centers varied along three axes:

seniority—three relatively established centers, two new ones, and two that were constructed during the study;

size of the hosting city—four in cities versus three in small suburbs; and

population in the hosting city—five in Jewish-only areas and two in urban areas with a mixed Arab–Jewish population.

In each center there were four groups of participants: the employees ($n = 47$ interviewed), adult volunteers ($n = 47$ interviewed, $n = 77$ questionnaires), youth volunteers (i.e., adolescents who volunteer in the centers; $n = 65$ questionnaires), clients (i.e., the beneficiaries of the service—adolescents who dropped in). The beneficiaries who filled in the questionnaires ($n = 179$) were not necessarily a random sample of those who came to the drop-in centers (see below for details of the participants).

In addition, representatives of the national management of ELEM were interviewed. In this group were the general director and CEO, the director of the drop-in center network, and the national volunteer coordinator.

Research Tools

Interviews. Semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted with volunteers and paid employees.

Observations. Nonparticipant observations ($n = 26$), following an observation guide, were held in the centers during everyday activities and staff meetings.

Case studies. The staff of the centers provided various case studies that fitted the research questions.

Questionnaire. The questionnaire for the clients/beneficiaries was constructed by the research team because no previous models were available. It contained five sub-questionnaires, all using Likert-type scales:

1. the kind of help the beneficiaries had received at the center: seven types of help (e.g., counseling, group meetings, referrals) by four degrees of frequency (from *never* to *more than four times*);
2. the perceived contribution of the volunteers in eight areas (e.g., studies, personal relationships, family relationships) by four degrees of extent (from *a great help* to *no help whatsoever*);
3. 19 statements of general attitudes toward volunteers and volunteering (e.g., “It is important for me to know if I am speaking to a volunteer or a paid worker,” “Volunteers are actually suckers,” “I have learnt from the volunteers that I too can volunteer”) by six degrees of agreement (from *absolutely agree* to *absolutely disagree*);
4. 5 statements about their satisfaction in general with the work of the adult and youth volunteers (e.g., “The volunteers in the center have helped me,” “I am satisfied with the attitude of the volunteers toward me”) by six degrees of agreement (from *absolutely agree* to *absolutely disagree*);

5. 6 statements about their satisfaction with the youth volunteers (e.g., “It is easier to feel close to the youth volunteers since they are kids like us,” “I have been very influenced by the youth volunteers here”) by six degrees of agreement (from *absolutely agree* to *absolutely disagree*).

Finally, there were a few personal questions (age, gender, schooling, and work).

All subquestionnaires were tested for internal consistency, and the Cronbach alphas ranged from .69 to .85. The questionnaires were given out by the staff, filled in anonymously, and returned to a box. We were unable to monitor the distribution and collection of the questionnaires, and so we cannot vouch for the randomness of the sample or estimate the proportion of those who handed in questionnaires.

Procedure

First, we held a symposium with representatives of the staff of all the centers (mainly, paid employees but also some veteran adult volunteers), as well as with the national director of the drop-in centers’ network and the national volunteer coordinator. The outcomes included the research tools, which we assessed in the pilot study and adapted accordingly. We ran an 18-month longitudinal study with two checkpoints. Because no differences were found between the two checkpoints concerning the beneficiaries, the findings here are combined. At each checkpoint, we interviewed the participants, observed the centers’ activities, and delivered the questionnaires. The staff served as research participants and to a certain extent, research assistants, given that they provided case studies, helped to collect the questionnaires, and clarified relevant issues. The research report considered the insightful responses of staff, which helped us to correct the final report in relation to the everyday work of the centers.

Data Analysis

The qualitative paradigm mainly guided the analysis of the results (Shkedi, 2003). First, each of us read all the qualitative data separately and defined various categories of meaning. In this stage, we attempted to make sense of the participants’ collective experience by transforming their personal stories into research categories based on our own experiences and knowledge (Stein & Mankowski, 2004). Following extensive discussion, we set up the various categories that stemmed from the results, into a tree of meanings, constructed by main themes, subcategories, and their relations. Thereafter, we added the quantitative data to support and broaden the described themes and to describe the relations between different categories. In addition, we decided that some of the quantitative data required new categories of meaning.

The validity and authenticity of the results were safeguarded by several procedures:

- peer validity*—extensive discussions among the members of the research team and additional responses from the staff of the centers and the management of the network;
- extended peer validity*—feedback from several colleagues;

triangulation—several sources of data that provided support to our analysis, including two evaluation reports; and
thick description—each category exemplified by relevant quotations from the interviews.

Results

The encounter between the volunteers and the adolescents whom they help, the beneficiaries of the service, can be analyzed in a number of ways. Our focus here is on the nature of the unique encounter between adolescents at risk and helpers, whose behavior is markedly prosocial—specifically, what impact does this encounter have on the adolescent beneficiaries? Before we proceed to this question, a brief description of the volunteers in the drop-in centers is worth noting.

Volunteers in the Drop-In Centers

ELEM may be considered as a young organization that employs relatively young workers, as well as volunteers, the latter of whom are divided into two groups: adult volunteers (usually young adults) and youth volunteers. The mean age of the adult volunteers ($n = 77$) was 28, and the median was 25 (see Table 1 below for sociodemographic characteristics of the adult volunteers). Most of the volunteers were born in Israel, and most were nonreligious. Only 12% of them were married. The majority were highly educated, mostly in the social sciences, and more than half were employed. Although about half the volunteers had experience in volunteering, most of it was short-term.

Similar to the adult volunteers, youth volunteers ($n = 67$) were mostly female (59%; see Table 2 for sociodemographic characteristics of the youth volunteers), with the majority being younger than 17 years ($M = 16.9$), nonreligious, Israeli born, and currently in high school. The youth volunteers filled completely different roles and enjoyed a completely different status from those of the adult volunteers. The latter were similar to the paid workers and carried out most of the same tasks. The former were similar to the beneficiaries, and indeed, some of them had first come to the center as clients and tended to blend in with them. Unlike the adult volunteers, the majority of the youth came to volunteer with their friends.

As such, the youth volunteers usually represented a population comparable to that of the clients, or the beneficiaries of the centers (see Table 3 for sociodemographic characteristics of the beneficiaries). Because of the operating principle of the centers (see below), the sociodemographic data on the beneficiaries of the service are scarce, and no clinical records are available. Furthermore, the beneficiaries who filled in the questionnaires about their encounters with volunteers ($n = 179$) were not necessarily those who provided the sociodemographic data ($n = 75$). Most of them were girls (60%) and the majority were in high school (M age = 15.7).

Table 1
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Adult Volunteers (*n* = 77)

Characteristic	%
Gender	
Women	58
Men	42
Age	
19-21	19
22-29	61
30+	20
Country of origin	
Israel	78
Former USSR	10
Ethiopia	1
Other	10
Religiosity	
Nonreligious	62
Observant	17
Believer	13
Orthodox	3
Other	5
Family status	
Nonmarried	85
Married	12
Divorced	3
Having children	15
Education	
Currently students	56
Graduated	21
Studies	
Social sciences	50
Engineering	15
Arts	5
Other	29
Employment (outside the centers)	
Full-time	27
Half-time	35
Unemployed	39
Employed at	
White collar	30
Human services and education	25
Student job	46
Volunteered before	
Never	49
Less than 1 year	70
More than 1 year	30
Came to volunteer	
Alone	81
With a friend	9
Part of a group	10

Note: Figures may not add to 100 because of rounding.

Table 2
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Youth Volunteers (*n* = 67)

Characteristic	%
Gender	
Girls	59
Boys	41
Age	
≤17	68
18-20	32
Country of origin	
Israel	60
Former USSR	32
Other	7
Religiosity	
Nonreligious	67
Observant	16
Believer	13
Other	4
Education	
Currently at school	88
Not studying (mostly finished school)	12
Employment	
Full-time	11
Half-time	24
Unemployed	65
Came to volunteer	
Alone	35
With a friend	65

Table 3
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Beneficiaries (*n* = 75)

Characteristic	%
Gender	
Girls	60
Boys	40
Age	
13-14	23
15-16	47
17-18	30
Education	
Currently at school	83
Employment	
Full-time	14
Half-time	20
Unemployed	66

Table 4
Categories of Services Received From Volunteers
and Their Relative Frequency (%)

Category of Service	Never	1 Time	2-4 Times	4+ Times
General information	5.6	27.2	36.7	30.5
Specific information	20.1	16.8	29.1	34.0
Counseling	24.6	16.8	19.6	39.0
Extended counseling—several meetings	36.5	12.9	18.0	32.6
Group meeting	41.6	15.7	16.9	25.8
Referral to other services	75.4	12.0	8.4	4.2

Note: *n* = 179. Each line sums to 100.

A major operating principle of the centers involves informality: There are no formal requirements from the attending adolescents; no clinical files are filled during a working day; and most of the counseling is taken without any official setting. The regular counseling is given by paid staff as well as by adult volunteers. In a given day, any worker present can meet any attending adolescent without preplanned matching and without personal coupling of counselor–client. Consequently, any beneficiary may regularly meet with volunteers and paid workers. The adolescents, however, as we describe below, know that most workers are volunteers, and they can recognize who is a paid worker. In our different sources of data (interviews, observations, evaluation reports), we never met any incorrect identification of a worker (paid or volunteer) by a beneficiary. We were unable to explore the reasons for this accuracy.

Getting Services From Volunteers

The first issue that we examined was that of whether the beneficiaries knew that volunteers provided, at least partially, the services in the center. Most adolescents (95%) answered that they had met volunteers in the centers and knew how to describe the various services that they had received from them (see Table 4).

The table clarifies that most beneficiaries received information or counseling from volunteers, sometimes even prolonged counseling. To examine the connection between these data and the attitudes of the beneficiaries, we created a combined counseling variable that included the items *general information*, *specific information*, *counseling*, and *extended counseling* (as opposed to *group meetings*, *referrals*, and *any other service*). In *t* tests for independent samples, we found significant differences between adolescents who reported higher and lower frequencies of counseling. Those adolescents who reported higher frequency of counseling held more positive attitudes toward volunteers, were more affected by the volunteers’ work, and were more satisfied with the service that they received in the center. For example, they believed that the volunteers helped them more, *M* = 4.9 versus *M* = 4.1, *t*(73) = 2.5, *p* = .02, and they were

more satisfied with the help that they had received, $M = 5.0$ versus $M = 4.3$, $t(73) = 2.7$, $p = .008$, and with the attitude of the volunteers, $M = 5.5$ versus $M = 4.9$, $t(73) = 2.4$, $p = .02$. In addition, they were more likely to advise their friends to go to the centers, although not significantly so, $M = 5.5$ versus $M = 5.0$, $p = .08$.

These adolescents held more positive attitudes toward voluntarism and could understand that volunteers get satisfaction from their volunteering, $t(169) = 1.85$, $p = .06$. This indicates that adolescents can have an awareness of the existence of a nonmaterial satisfaction and the benefits of prosocial behavior. In the same way, adolescents who received more counseling reported a higher effect of this encounter on their worldviews. For example, they scored higher on the item "The volunteers taught me that there is goodness in the world," $M = 4.2$ versus 3.4 , $t(168) = 3.8$, $p < .001$.

Differences Between Volunteers and Paid Workers

One research question examined (a) whether the adolescents perceived the paid workers and the volunteers differently or (b) whether volunteering colored the whole center and the adolescents did not distinguish between them.

Qualitative as well as quantitative data suggest that the adolescents prefer to speak to a volunteer. About half the respondents answered that it is important for them to know whether the helper is a volunteer or a paid worker ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.9$, on an ascending scale of 1–6). To understand the preference of the respondents, we created three variables from the data:

"Volunteers are better than paid workers"—constructed from the averaging of the scores on the items "Volunteers care more than paid workers," "It is easier to speak to volunteers since they are not professional and there is no stigma," and "The volunteers give from the soul, more than the paid workers";

"Paid workers are better than the volunteers"—constructed from the averaging of the scores on the items "It is difficult to speak with volunteers since they are not professional enough" and "The paid workers are more dedicated than the volunteers"; and "preference for volunteers"—a combination of the above two variables set in opposed relation, creating a variable that indicates the preference for volunteers.

About half (55%, $M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.2$) the adolescents thought that the volunteers were better than the paid workers, whereas only a quarter (27.5%, $M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.2$) thought that the paid workers were better. No significant correlation (Pearson $p = .10$) was found between these two variables; that is, respondents who scored high on the first did not necessarily score correspondingly low on the second. The combined variable reveals that the majority (86%, $M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.8$) of the respondents preferred volunteers to paid workers. In other words, they distinguished between paid workers and volunteers and favored the latter. Those respondents who preferred volunteers scored significantly higher on the item "Volunteers are people who really care," $M = 5.2$ versus $M = 4.4$, $t(165) = 3.31$, $p = .001$, and these two variables stand

in a significant correlation, $r_p = .35$, $p < .001$. In addition, respondents who scored higher on the “preference for volunteers” variable also scored higher on the items “I am satisfied with the help provided by the volunteers,” $M = 5.0$ versus $M = 4.3$, $t(69) = 2.29$, $p = .025$, and “I am satisfied with the attitude of the volunteers,” $M = 5.5$ versus $M = 4.8$, $t(69) = 2.97$, $p = .004$. Finally, respondents who scored higher on the “preference for volunteers” variable also scored higher on the item of recommending the center to their friends, $M = 5.6$ versus $M = 4.9$, $t(69) = 2.55$, $p = .013$.

To conclude, the adolescents distinguished who was a volunteer and who was a paid worker. They favored the volunteers, although a minority of them preferred the paid workers. Supporting these conclusions were the observations during the everyday activities of the centers and the interviews with volunteers and paid workers. The satisfaction of the adolescents with the volunteers’ service corresponds with their preference for the volunteers. In the next section, we qualitatively analyze the unique influence of volunteers. Because we did not speak directly to the target youth, we collected these data from the interviews with the paid workers and the volunteers. Although the latter might be considered biased, the former should be considered objective.

Unique Influence of Volunteers

Analysis of the interviews points out several factors relating to the impact of the volunteers on those whom they help. The major finding concerned the motivation that the beneficiaries attributed to the volunteers. Because the volunteers were not paid and thus did not follow the everyday rules of give and take, they were perceived as true altruists, giving without anticipating or receiving any reward. This finding was a consistent impression that appeared through the various interviews of adult volunteers and paid employees of the centers. However, because we did not interview the beneficiaries, we did not hear it directly from them. Nonetheless, an adult volunteer put it like this:

[Volunteering] has a great influence. . . . “How come she is not paid? It comes from the heart!” . . . They say, “Look, this young woman comes and helps us without any self-interest.” . . . I hear it not only in their words but also between the words, in their gestures; they treat me differently from the paid staff!

Helping without receiving any material reward carries a caring message to youth that they highly value and praise. One worker said,

Their feeling is great. At first they say, “Oh, she is a sucker,” but afterwards, “She isn’t paid; what is she doing here? Is she a misfit? No, she isn’t; she looks a great person. . . . She does it for free; she cares about me!”

Another worker said,

When they come and say, "I am a volunteer here," it becomes a totally different relationship, a different discourse. . . . An adolescent who has gone through life feeling that there is no one who can help her, everyone is against her, and the world is a bad place suddenly comes upon this person whose attitude is really pure, who really wants to do good, and who doesn't receive any material reward for it! That is a value that can't be implanted by a thousand paid workers!

Relationship of Volunteers and Beneficiaries

In the questionnaire, the beneficiaries were asked about the extent of the assistance that they could get from volunteers in different areas. As shown in Table 5, the salient areas in which the beneficiaries identified the volunteers' contribution were personal conflicts (83%) and social relationships (about 75%). Slightly less prominent contributions were found in family relationships (about 63%) and in relationships with the opposite gender (about 59%). The areas where adolescents said the volunteers assisted them less were in their studies at school, connections with school and other authorities, and connections with the army (national military service). (The eighth category was *any other area*.) We can conclude that the adolescent beneficiaries perceived the volunteers as a valid address for help in all areas.

These findings confirm the descriptions given by volunteers in interviews of the help that they gave to the adolescents. One volunteer said,

How many adults really pay attention to them seriously and are ready to listen to their troubles as well as to their nonsense? From their point of view, it is great!

To further examine the effect of these accounts on the beneficiaries' attitudes, we created a combined variable that included the averaging of the answers to the items *relationships with family, personal conflicts, social relationships, and relationships with the other gender* (as opposed to *studies, connections with school and other authorities, connections with the military, and any other area*). This variable reflects the importance that most beneficiaries gave to these factors, as well as the assumption that counseling in the centers focuses on these interwoven relationships. A higher score on this variable indicates a reportedly higher contribution of the volunteers in these personal issues.

In a *t* test for independent samples, several significant findings indicated that adolescents who reported that they were helped more by the volunteers in these personal issues were more influenced by the volunteering and were more satisfied with the services of the volunteers. Beneficiaries who scored higher on this variable reported more general satisfaction with the service at the center (on a 1–6 ascending scale). For example, they believed that the volunteers helped them more, $M = 4.8$ versus $M = 4.0$, $t(71) = 2.4$, $p = .02$, were more satisfied with the help provided by the volunteers, $M = 5.0$ versus $M = 4.2$, $t(71) = 2.95$, $p = .004$, and believed that they got help as they expected, $M = 5.0$ versus $M = 4.5$, $t(71) = 2.0$, $p = .05$. These adolescents expressed a

Table 5
Contribution of the Volunteers From the
Beneficiaries' Questionnaire (%)

Domain of Contribution	None	Slight	Moderate	High
Studying	52.7	22.5	11.8	13.0
Connections with school and authorities	59.3	17.4	13.4	9.9
Relationships with family	37.1	17.1	25.2	20.6
Personal conflicts	16.6	20.0	24.5	38.9
Social relationships	24.6	18.7	22.8	33.9
Relationships with the other gender	41.4	17.8	16.7	24.1
Connections with the army	72.7	5.5	9.1	12.7

Note: $n = 170$. Each line sums to 100.

more positive attitude toward volunteering and the volunteers and scored higher on the items “Volunteers are people who care,” $M = 5.4$ versus 4.8 , $t(168) = 3.25$, $p = .001$, “The volunteers get satisfaction from volunteering,” $M = 5.1$ versus 4.5 , $t(164) = 2.9$, $p = .004$, “The volunteers showed me the goodness in the world,” $M = 4.3$ versus 3.4 , $t(163) = 3.4$, $p = .001$, and “I learned from the volunteers that it is worthwhile to volunteer myself,” $M = 4.3$ versus $M = 3.8$, $t(164) = 1.95$, $p = .05$. Beneficiaries who scored higher on receiving help on personal issues were more likely to recommend the service to their friends, $M = 5.6$ versus $M = 4.9$, $t(71) = 2.6$, $p = .01$.

In addition to revealing the beneficial results of counseling given by the volunteers, we found a significant positive correlation between the contribution of the counseling and its frequency, $t(176) = 0.48$, $p < .001$; that is, the more an adolescent received services, the higher she or he evaluated the contribution of the counseling.

Informal Role Model

Many adolescents who dropped into the centers had had some experience with professionals: social workers, psychologists, counselors, and others. In other words, many of the adolescents were satiated with professional intervention. In the drop-in centers, they met volunteers without professional titles, thereby suggesting an informal encounter that took place without any commitment. A volunteer described this uniqueness of their work:

I couldn't imagine this place run only by professional paid workers. All social services work with professional paid workers. This is the only one that doesn't, that is built on voluntary work, and that gives it its special character.

As seen above, the adolescents perceived the volunteers as people who really cared and who did meaningful, satisfying work. As revealed in the questionnaire, 63.7% of the responders agreed with the statement “Volunteers showed me that there

is goodness in the world,” $M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.60$ (on a 1-6 ascending scale). We may therefore perceive the encounter with the volunteers as a way of transferring values by means of personal example. One worker described this aspect as such:

[The volunteers] can serve as role models, in this aspect of caring and their responsibility to the community. It is giving to the community, and when adolescents meet them and see how they give of themselves and are ready to give more, it gives them a kind of a push.

This personal example may encourage adolescents to imitate the volunteers. Indeed, many adolescents who came to the drop-in centers and were exposed to the volunteers expressed their own wish to volunteer, and some even became volunteers, therefore demonstrating the high significance of the personal example. The personal example not only influenced the behavior of the adolescents but also contributed to their developmental potential. One volunteer said,

With some kids, it becomes a meaningful issue that she or he wants to be like you. . . . If we succeed in putting it into their heads, if you become a role model and they apply it in their lives, less in adolescence, more in adulthood, it also strengthens the community. In such a community, which is weak and has a very low socioeconomic status, I think it is a meaningful factor; it may carry a long-lasting influence towards the rehabilitation of the community.

This volunteer expressed a perception that emphasized the contribution of volunteering to the community itself, in a sense that the volunteers are educational models.

The influence of the personal example of the volunteers on the intention to volunteer is expressed in the questionnaire. For the item “Before I came to the drop-in center I considered volunteering,” the adolescents were not consistent (only 43% agreed with it). However, most of them agreed with the item “I learned from the volunteers that it is worthwhile to volunteer myself” (69%; $M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.5$, on a 1-6 ascending scale). For further analysis, we compared the response to the item “Before I came to the drop-in center I considered volunteering” to other responses. Of the group who had not considered volunteering before coming to the center, 82% thought that volunteers get satisfaction from volunteering, ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 1.2$), and 62% of the respondents in this group said that they learned from the volunteers to volunteer themselves ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 1.6$). However, a meaningful finding is that adolescents who had considered volunteering before they entered the centers scored higher on those two items than did those who had not. In independent sample t tests, the differences were significant: for the item “Volunteers do get satisfaction from volunteering,” $t(165) = 2.15$, $p = .03$, and for the item “I learned from the volunteers that it is worthwhile to volunteer myself,” $t(164) = 3.0$, $p = .003$.

We may conclude that those adolescents who had considered volunteering held more positive attitudes concerning volunteering. But both groups were influenced by the encounter with volunteers, in the same direction: For one group of adolescents, it strengthened their attitudes, and for the other, it changed them.

Discussion and Implications

This exploratory attempt to study the unique impact of volunteers in the human services on their target populations reveals the existence of a marked contribution that may affect the service as a whole. Volunteers succeed in providing various initial intervention services to youth at risk in drop-in centers. The beneficiaries of the service knew that volunteers serviced them; they were satisfied with this service to the degree of preferring it to that of paid workers; they held or learned positive attitudes toward volunteering; and they were affected by the encounter with volunteering.

These results underlie the need to create a valid human contact between meaningful adults and youth in general and at-risk youth in particular (Jarrett et al., 2005; Zeldin et al., 2005). The volunteers' success in this mission marks the whole service as a preventive one. Although we have no data on the behavioral outcomes of meeting the volunteers, their ability to provide meaningful relationships with the target youth is a significant development within any given community. One may assume that such relationships with the volunteers and with the centers—normative services that belong to the normative community—support and strengthen the social bonds of the adolescent clients with their communities (Hawkins & Catalano, 1992; Hirschi, 1969). This assumption calls for further study.

In general, adolescents at risk do not relate to the nonmaterial motives that lead to volunteering. Nevertheless, as seen above, they learned about nonmaterial benefits from their encounters with the volunteers. According to their perceptions, if there is no material reward, then a pure altruistic attitude is indicated. The adolescents in the current study perceived the volunteers as true altruists who did not follow the everyday norm of give and take and thus constituted an experiential model of altruistic thinking at the highest level (Krebs & Van Hesteren, 1994). The encounter with such an attitude was surprising for them and influenced their worldviews. Usually, youth at risk hold egocentric worldviews (Elkind, 1967; Gibbs, 1991), which do not accept nonmaterial motives. However, the encounter with the volunteers indicated that such motives do exist and that there are benefits from them. These results shed light on this relatively neglected field of study and support the significance of perceived altruism in intervention.

Consequently, the most significant impact of the volunteers is that they set a living example of the possibility of human goodness in personal encounters and show the existence of a responsible community with mutual, nonconditional caring. Because the volunteers represent individuals with purely helpful intentions for the adolescents, they evolve an image of a community that takes care of its members. Such images of individuals and community are quite different from those that youth at risk are familiar with; hence, volunteers have the power to broaden the scope of the adolescents' experiences and thus neutralize their resistance to intervention.

These results are particularly important, considering the need for innovative interventions with youth in general and youth at risk in particular, to promote competence, optimism, compassion, and other strengths in children and adolescents (Gillham, Reivich, & Shatte, 2002). We believe that when adolescents are infused with these

strengths, they can become resilient to a variety of problems. The encounter with volunteers and their perceived altruism carries a promise to impart new strengths and to affect the target population in a different way.

The adolescents in our study perceived the volunteers as well-intended altruists and reacted accordingly. Following the encounter with volunteers, they changed their worldviews to include an alternative possibility of altruistic caring, and they even expressed a wish to become volunteers themselves. Thus, we may perceive the encounter with the volunteers as a way of passing on values within the community by means of personal example. By the encounter with volunteers, which is apparently different from that with paid professionals, adolescents are directly exposed to a living example of such positive values as interpersonal giving, mutual caring, and good and responsible citizenship.

The perception of volunteering as a true altruistic act accepted by the adolescents may increase the potential of role modeling set by the volunteers. Meeting volunteers carries a nonmediated educational message. Through this encounter, youngsters may grow up to become volunteers themselves, and in a relatively weak community, this possibility may empower the community itself.

In addition, because of their perceived altruism, the volunteers had the power to gain trust from their adolescent clients, thereby indicating an advantage to a service that employs volunteers. The nonprofessional nature of the volunteers increases this advantage. This intrinsic trustworthiness toward volunteers opens a possible way of meeting the known resistance of adolescents to services operated by the establishment. Given the importance of encounters between youth and adults within community life (Jarrett et al., 2005; Zeldin et al., 2005), the inclusion of volunteers within a service encourages these encounters by operating on various levels.

As a result, adolescents who use the drop-in centers as clients often become volunteers in these centers. This process points to a distinct characteristic of the centers, namely, that they open a possibility for these youth to volunteer. The centers create a service that is operated by volunteers but enables its clients to volunteer themselves. The classic distinction between clients and service providers is no more valid. A client may drop in, learn from the positive role modeling, express a wish to apply it in his or her life, and find an appropriate channel in the same service. In other words, a client is exposed to a common goodness; he or she is influenced by it and has the ability to join in and to act with the same goodness. Of course, this scenario is valid only for some of the adolescents. When it happens, it is similar to the influence of self-help groups, organizations of volunteers where members learn values by experiencing them passively and actively (Katz & Bender, 1990; Ronel, 1998).

We must emphasize the limitations of this study that limit its generalization. First, the marked, declared informality of the centers and the lack of clinical records limit the extent of data available and, consequently, our ability to more deeply analyze the results. Second, the fact that the beneficiaries were not interviewed directly and that we had to rely on descriptions of workers, however thick, reduces the weight of our conclusions in regard to the perceived altruism, although the quantitative data give some support to these conclusions and never contradict them. Third, the sample is

not random, and we cannot claim that it represents youth at risk in Israel or, for that matter, anywhere else. Fourth, although there is no reason to suspect that there is any element of social desirability in the questionnaire, it is possible that those youth who were least satisfied with the drop-in center and the volunteers would have been least likely to have filled it in. Fifth, a follow-up study could show more definitively whether youth can be persuaded to volunteer by example.

Further research is needed on the subject of working with youth at risk in general and on this aspect of the use of volunteers in particular. The work of volunteers in professional organizations has attracted some interest (e.g., Grube & Piliavin, 2000), but there is a need for research on the effects of volunteers on paid professionals and vice versa.

From the above, we learned the importance of perceived altruism and goodness in initial intervention. Does it imply that the ideal human service provider is a volunteer? Although volunteers have some advantages (the description of their disadvantages is beyond our scope here), our study does not support such a conclusion. First, our study shows that a minority of the clients prefer dealing with paid professionals, for whatever reasons. Second, our quantitative data show that volunteers and paid staff learn to work together and complement and supplement each other. Thus, the volunteers—particularly, the youth volunteers—were generally those who first approached newcomers to the center, spoke to them, and gave them their first taste of the services offered. However, most of the beneficiaries knew the professional limitations of the volunteers and the strengths of the paid staff and used them accordingly.

Moreover, we may assume that any intervention that succeeds in maintaining perceived altruism and goodness might have similar qualities to those of volunteering. A paid professional worker may project those qualities of caring and altruism that come naturally to the volunteer and may thus be as successful or more successful. Volunteers generally upgrade the humanism of social services, and professionals can and should learn to build on this.

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