When good overcomes bad: The impact of volunteers on those they help

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ABSTRACT   This qualitative study examines the impact of a personal encounter with perceived goodness, as represented by volunteers who are perceived as altruistic by those they help. It focuses on the encounter between at-risk street youths and lay volunteers in a mobile outreach service. The findings reveal that the street youths perceived the volunteers as representing pure altruism, and this stimulated several positive processes. Meeting the volunteers raised their awareness of giving without expecting a reward, which sharply contradicts their view of the world as a battlefield. Consequently, they understood and partially internalized the idea of non-material gratification. In some cases, the example set by the volunteers inspired the young people to consider volunteering themselves. Finally, they were able to generalize the altruistic image to the entire service and overcome their initial objections to a service run by the establishment. The proposed explanation, related to positive psychology, refers to the contrast between the example of the volunteers and the self-centeredness of the street youths, which shifted slightly as a result.

KEYWORDS   adolescents at-risk ▪ altruism ▪ goodness ▪ mental health & therapy ▪ self-centeredness ▪ volunteers

Introduction

What impact does a personal encounter with perceived altruism and the experience of being the direct object of highly positive human virtues have on individuals? Extensive research has dealt with the impact of facing bad experiences or human relationships, from biological, social, criminological, psychological, and other perspectives. However, scholars have paid less attention to the impact of facing unconditional goodness (one inspiring exception is Sorokin, 1967), manifested by perceived altruism, although recently, interest in this topic has grown (e.g. Underwood, 2005). Accordingly, the extensive study of altruism and pro-social behavior has focused on different variables at the micro-, meso-, or macro-level (Penner et al., 2005; Piliavin & Charng, 1990; Rachlin, 2002), but unfortunately has not yet targeted its special impact on its beneficiaries.

The current phenomenological pilot study attempts to explore this important, yet relatively neglected field of study, by focusing on the process that evolves from the encounter of street youths with volunteers who are perceived as good-hearted and altruistic. To the best of my knowledge, it is the first attempt to study the impact on a target audience of the encounter with volunteers and with perceived altruism, in particular, and one of the very few to study the impact of perceived goodness, in general. For clarification, goodness, badness, and altruism are considered here as values added to human relations by those who subjectively experience them, and not as objective entities. They are understood here as attributes of human encounter that may impact those involved. The understanding of this impact is the purpose of the present work.

Altruism and positive experiences

In an impressively extensive review of studies with a wide range of perspectives, Baumeister et al. (2001) claim that the effect of bad experiences on individuals is stronger than good ones, and therefore human relationships are affected more by negative, destructive encounters than by positive, constructive ones. These results may explain the preoccupation in social science with badness and its impact. However, recently a growing number of scholars have questioned this bias in research and clinical practice (e.g. Gable & Haidt, 2005). Even Baumeister et al. (2001) express some discontent with their findings, and encourage researchers to search for and identify circumstances in which good events overpower bad ones. In accordance with this suggestion, the implication of the current study goes far beyond the work of volunteers or human services with marginal population groups, as it may

expand our understanding of the nature of positive human encounters, in general.

Theoretically, this subject is associated with the growing field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which 'is about positive subjective experience' (Seligman, 2002: 3). Positive psychology is a reaction to the prevailing emphasis in the social sciences on negative and destructive factors that may be associated with impaired development and behavioral disorders (Sheldon & King, 2001). On the grounds of only a few empirical studies of the positive emotions that we feel when others do good, positive psychology signals a shift by focusing on understanding positive experiences and their significance. This change implies that any theory in the social sciences should include consideration of the power of goodness and its influence on individuals and groups. Such inclusion may, in effect, overcome what Kohlberg (1981) identifies as a natural fallacy of psychology, that is, the study of the 'is' rather than the 'ought', or in other words, the biased study of prevailing badness rather than aspired-for goodness.

An underlying assumption of positive psychology is that positive traits and experiences are neither a result of nor secondary to negative processes (Duckworth et al., 2005). Since positive traits and experiences are authentic by nature, they should be studied as they are, and not as manifestations of negative or nihilistic intentions. The theories and studies of altruism may exemplify this need.

As a focus of research, altruism usually falls in between an everlasting conflict between those who perceive it to be an authentic experience and those who perceive it as rooted in selfishness (Khalil, 2004). While Fehr and Fischbacher (2003) suggest a description of altruism based on evolutionary grounds and claim that '[a]ltruistic behaviour in real-life circumstances can almost always be attributed to different motives', others (e.g. Batson et al., 2002; Clohesy, 2000) define altruism as a unique motivation that aspires to benefit others, transcending private self-interest. These researchers stress the importance of a model that goes beyond the self-interest explanation of human intentions. In an extensive review, Post (2005) demonstrates and provides explanations for a correlation between altruistic behavior and the physical health and psychological well-being of the actors. However, he does not describe the impact on the recipients of the altruistic act. In the current study, although the immanent nature of altruism is not a topic, the process by which perceived altruism bears influence is a major focus of interest. Accordingly, the study refers to altruism as a positive motivation that bears impact, without binding it to presumed selfishness or other hidden motives.

In her broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, Fredrickson

(2001) asserts that positive concerns encourage individuals to engage positively with their environments. Positive emotions share the ability to broaden individuals' behavioral repertoires and build their enduring personal resources. In the same vein, Gillham et al. (2002) discuss the preventive power of interventions that emphasize positive qualities in children and adolescents. From a similar perspective, in an extensive study of volunteers in welfare organizations in Ireland, Mac Neela (n.d.) concludes that 'volunteers were described as bringing something special to the organisation, involving the helping/giving ethos' (p. 146). Unfortunately, Mac Neela does not provide a detailed description of this helping/giving ethos and does not analyze its influence.

Volunteers

Existing knowledge about volunteers in the human services focuses mainly on the volunteers themselves (e.g. Fitch, 1987; Naftali, 1999) or on organizational issues related to their employment (e.g. Cnaan & Cascio, 1999). In these fields, research usually examines characteristics of volunteers and the motives behind their decision to volunteer, compares the effectiveness of volunteers with that of professionals (Golden, 1991), or explores the influence of volunteering on the volunteers themselves and the benefits they may gain (Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988; Hocking & Lawrence, 2000; Johnson et al., 1998; Moore & Allen, 1996; Schondel et al., 1995). However, there is a marked lacuna in our knowledge of the special impact that volunteers, who may symbolize altruism and good intentions, have on their target audience. This is a particularly relevant issue in a service that targets at-risk youngsters, since this population is considered hard to reach, and one that resists intervention.

Street adolescents

Adolescents who stay on the street, whether because it is their main recreation site, or because they are homeless, rarely seek help from the official human services. This is due to their sense of alienation and vulnerability, as well as the distrust of such services (Kariv-Ben-Moshe, 2002; Molnar et al., 1998). To facilitate interventions with street youths who are difficult to access, situated on the social margins, and who belong to a negativist subculture, an inventive service is required (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2005). Outreach work is an important part of such a service. It reaches out to adolescents on the street, provides them with shelter from street life, and offers a place to talk (Brown, 1986; Dilorenzo et al., 1993;

Susser et al., 1990). It also offers youth unique, non-institutionalized encounters, in which therapeutic relationships can develop.

The current study focuses on the encounter between street youths and volunteers of the night vans operated by Elem (the Association for Youth in Distress and at Risk). The vans are an outreach service that looks for adolescents on the streets and provides them with basic needs (food and clothes), informal counseling, and referrals to welfare services. The vans' work is based heavily on volunteers. Our aim was to investigate the impact on the street youth of meeting volunteers, the process that evolves in the encounter, and the implications for our understanding of therapeutic and human relationships.

Method

Research of the van service began in 1999 and continued for a year. It focused on two vans – the Tel Aviv van, which was the archetype for the service, and the Jerusalem van. Since the vans constitute an exclusive service that employs unique methods with a special population, studying it required an appropriate research design that would enable us to understand the distinctive phenomena (Polkinghorne, 1989) without interfering in them. We choose a qualitative, phenomenological-interpretative research design (Bryman, 1988; Spinelli, 1989; Van Manen, 1997) that relies on participatory observations of the van team's work and interviews with people who formed direct ties with the adolescents. A limitation was that we could not administer questionnaires to the street adolescents or conduct interviews with them, because of their typical distrust of people identified with the establishment, and also because we wanted to avoid any interference with the vans' regular work.

An underlying assumption was that experiencing human phenomena might enhance studying them; therefore the study was planned in a direct dialogue between the researchers and the van teams (Borkman & Schubert, 1994).[1] Thus academic knowledge was combined with the experiential knowledge gained in working with street youth (Reason, 1994). We considered the van teams as participants of the study who played a role in conducting the study and explaining the meaning of the data collected. In addition, one research assistant participated in the regular everyday work of one of the vans.

The phenomenon under study was the experience of meetings between street youths and volunteers and its meaning. Our methodology enabled us to describe this subjective image and its meaning (Kockelmans, 1987). It was

composed of several triangulated components of data collection, which together enhanced the validity of the results (Shkedi, 2003).

Participatory observation

A member of the research team who is a social worker joined the Tel Aviv van team and spent a year participating in its activities. Among other things, she observed the work of the van volunteers and their impact on the adolescents. Care was taken to observe the natural behavior of the youths and volunteers in the natural environment of their encounter, as part of the process that would have occurred anyway, even if the researchers were not present (Kidder & Judd, 1986; Tunnel, 1977). The study can be defined as an inquiry from the inside (Evered & Meryl, 1981), because the researcher became part of the phenomenon being investigated. Following the typology of participatory observers offered by Atkinson and Hammersley (1994), this researcher joined the van as a researcher-observer who participated in its work, but gradually identified herself more as a participant who also served as a researcher-observer. In such a research design, there may be tension between the methodological and the epistemological requirements, and it is not uncommon to loosen the methodological preciosity for the benefit of the epistemological information (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). The primary researcher (and author of this article), who did not participate in the van's activities, addressed the risk of bias that may arise with this methodology by providing a complementary 'outsider's' perspective (Evered & Meryl, 1981).

Interviews with van workers

Numerous in-depth interviews were held over several months with five of the van workers. The interviews were unstructured, and were conducted in the conversation-with-a-purpose method, where interviewer and respondent talk freely about the subject of the interview. The goal of the interviews was to obtain a full description of how the van service functioned, its objectives, and its operating principles, as perceived and performed by the workers. A central issue that arose during the interviews was the inclusion of volunteers in the van team and its impact on the adolescents. The van workers were asked to outline cases of adolescents whom they met during their work. The outlines were based on the van logbook and the workers' recollections. Around 30 cases that the van team had helped were outlined. These data portrayed the ongoing relationship of the team members and volunteers with the youth.

Interviews with adolescents

Although we could not directly interview most of the young people, we were able to interview three of them (two from Jerusalem and one from Tel Aviv) who maintained long-term contact with the van teams. During a pre-arranged meeting in a café, the three were questioned extensively about their experience with the van volunteers. These adolescents do not constitute a representative sample. The interviews with them are included here to verify the data obtained from the other sources.

Data analysis

The data analysis was performed by the qualitative phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1975; Shkedi, 2003). The process entailed a first reading of all the raw material, which suggested a general sense of the volunteers' work and its impact; an additional reading, in which we identified separate categories of meaning with respect to the volunteers' impact; referring the various categories to each other; translating the categories into scholarly language (the term 'altruism', for example); and integrating the insights gained to obtain a meaningful description of voluntary work and its impact. To reinforce the authenticity of this description, we asked the van team to read the interim results of the analysis and comment on whether it reflected the true situation.

It should be noted that the current qualitative methodology, which uses neither random sampling nor controlled design, limits the ability to generalize from this study. Rather, it provides an in-depth case study, the main findings of which may be transferred to other cases.

Results

A short description of the volunteers' work will serve as background to the discussion of how the street adolescents viewed this activity.

Using volunteers

A key operating principle of the night vans was the regular use of volunteers. During the period of the research, 14 volunteers worked with the Tel Aviv team, and 16 volunteers with the Jerusalem team. Most of them joined the tours of the streets, and some of them volunteered auxiliary services, such as donating clothes or making sandwiches and cakes and bringing them to the

site. A physician occasionally joined the team on a volunteer basis, to arrange tests for the adolescents (for HIV, hepatitis, and so on).

The volunteer profile varied, with ages ranging from 21 to 60. Some were students, others worked in the caring professions, and there were also physicians, computer experts, and soldiers in the standing army. Volunteers were assigned to regular sites, which they visited once a week. They functioned like the salaried van workers – they conducted conversations and interventions, provided material help, and so on. In cases where decisions were required, the volunteer consulted with the workers, in real-time if possible. Like the workers, the volunteers generally created ongoing relationships with several adolescents, who waited for them to arrive at the site.

All volunteers attended regular group training for volunteers and workers. The meetings included reviews of events on the street, ventilation talks, and discussions of cases. When necessary, the volunteer coordinators also provided individual training. General volunteer training (providing information on drug use, the structure of the city's service system, and the like) was administered once every three months.

An example of a long-term relationship established between an adolescent from a male prostitution area and an adult volunteer may serve to illustrate the work of the volunteers.

> D. was around 20 when the van staffers first met him in Hahashmal Park (a male prostitution area). He was dressed in women's clothes and used marijuana regularly. After a long period of distrust and hostility towards the van, he struck up a particularly close relationship with a volunteer, and she has been accompanying him for three years in a development process. At first, the relationship with the volunteer was limited to once a week, when the van arrived at the park, but later it expanded beyond the official volunteering hours – to meetings in cafés, or offering help and support in various aspects of life. For example, the volunteer went with D. to arrange his affairs with the social services, helped with his dental treatment, taught him how to look for a job, and also joined him in the process of seeking and finding work. After a year of this close relationship, D. no longer went to the park, ceased any contact with prostitution, and started working for a company that provides services to the elderly. He rented an apartment, paying the rent himself.

As in this story, the encounters that developed between street adolescents and volunteers often transcended the framework of the services provided by the vans, or any other framework. The boundaries of the helping process and its

characteristics were flexible and open to changes, in accordance with the needs that arose. Some volunteers allowed the adolescents to phone them at any time, meet them during the day in cafés or elsewhere, and join them on everyday errands. Since each volunteer created close ties with a relatively small number of adolescents, they were able to make themselves available to the youths more intensively, if necessary. The following example illustrates the broad and flexible range in which the volunteers offered help.

> A., aged 22, had abandoned her religious beliefs and family, and was alone in the world. She suffered a mental disorder, and survived on a basic allowance from the social services. As part of a meaningful relationship with the van-staffers, A. said she would like to fix her teeth, which had been severely neglected. A volunteer managed to arrange free treatment by a volunteer dentist.

Since the volunteers were not necessarily welfare professionals, the nature of the healing relationships created between them and the adolescents was not that of formal therapy. They can be better defined as a combination of friendship and mentoring, usually unconditional. Furthermore, the way that the adolescents perceived these relationships and were influenced by them was distinct from their relations with the workers.

The impact of volunteers on adolescents

Analysis of the findings reveals that the presence of volunteers on the van team and the encounter between at-risk youths and volunteers providing them with services influenced the adolescents in several ways.

An innovative encounter with voluntary work and altruism

For most of the adolescents, this was the first encounter with volunteers and it was a significant innovation for them. For the first time they realized that some people are willing to devote their time for the good of others (in this case, for them) without receiving any material reward. Most of the street youths were accustomed to a materialistic 'grab whatever you can' ethos, and for many of them, this was the rule even in the closest relationships with their family or partners. Few had come across relationships grounded on giving something without getting an immediate, and usually material, reward. Thus, they considered the volunteers, who received no material benefit, as representing altruistic motives and attitudes, even though this may not have been the volunteers' chief motive. In evidence, the volunteer

coordinator for Jerusalem pointed out that the question 'Are you a worker or a volunteer?' was a very common one, and the answer surprised the young people every time:

> They are amazed that people give them something for nothing, without payment. This sort of giving also frees those who receive the service from the obligation to give something in return, to progress, to prove – nothing is expected of them – and this is what enables a genuine relationship to evolve.

The impressions of the van teams, which were confirmed by the participatory observations, were that encountering volunteers and acts of selfless giving without requests for material reward broadened the worldview of the adolescents. The notion of volunteer work opened the youths' eyes to the possibility of indirect, non-material gratification. For many of them, this was a corrective experience (albeit preliminary and possibly limited). One adolescent said, 'If there are really people who care, and they give and give without getting anything, then perhaps the world's not as awful as I thought . . . the Elem people . . . showed me there are different options . . . not just surviving like I was doing . . .' Another one said that 'all of a sudden, people want to help you; it changes your negative ideas about the world. I have to believe in good and that there's hope'.

As these comments demonstrate, most of the street youths were accustomed to negative human encounters and relationships in which they were abused, neglected, or had to struggle to survive. Experiences of support and true caring were rare in their lives. This accumulated experience resulted in a suspicious, alienated, and survival-oriented attitude, which may explain their initial resistance to any intervention. However, meeting the volunteers, whom they perceived as altruistic, made a change in their everyday experience. For some of the youths, this change was only an initial, although different stimulus. We have no data on its overall impact on them. But others, as the data reveal, internalized this marked shift in their human experience and began a process of transformation in their attitudes and, subsequently, in their lives. However, measuring the magnitude of this transformative process is beyond the scope of this pilot study.

The Tel Aviv van coordinator maintained that coming face to face with what they perceived to be pure altruism was something of a jolt to the worldview of the adolescents. As such, it helped to convey Elem's message of unconditional acceptance:

> But then it emerges that not everyone is actually getting paid, and something changes in their attitude to us. The encounter is free of

personal interests; it is completely different from any encounter they've had previously with other service providers. In our work, we try to be special and to radiate acceptance and disinterest in personal gain, and the volunteers – in fact, their voluntary work – get this message across in the strongest way. There were cases when after a certain time people we met as clients said that they'd like to volunteer, too. You have to remember that there's a big gap between words and deeds, but even expressing the desire means something.

Increasing the emotional accessibility of the service

Another major finding concerns the way the adolescents perceived the Elem service. In accordance with findings in the literature (e.g. Kariv-Ben-Moshe, 2002), many young people who had contacts with the vans described their resistance to and mistrust of professional workers employed by the official services. One of the youths we interviewed spoke disparagingly of all social workers, including the one with whom he'd been in regular contact: 'I don't tell her anything. I only go there when I need money, and I tell her all sorts of tales. I don't think she cares about me at all; she only cares about the money. It's not a good relationship.'

Their resistance had another source as well. Many adolescents consider seeking professional therapy as an indication of a mental disorder and weakness. The volunteers, who do not belong to the establishment and are not official therapists, are out of the range of this definition, and there-fore, of such resistance. Consequently, the street youths viewed them more favorably than the paid workers. Volunteers were not perceived as inter-ested parties, and their inclusion on the van team was found to contribute to the clients' perception of the service's emotional accessibility. It also helped to bridge the gap between the adolescents and the workers. For example, the participatory observation showed that many street youths told volunteers that they could talk to them because they were not part of the establishment. They frequently heard sentences such as 'If you were a psychologist or a counselor, I would never have talked to you'. One inter-viewee maintained that 'psychologists aren't human, they aren't human beings. At Elem, you meet real people'. Later, referring to one of the volun-teers, the same respondent commented that 'he really invests efforts, he gives of himself . . . he's a good person'. Goodness, which volunteering proves, is clearly important to that young man, and to many others too. The perceived kindness also enhances the emotional accessibility of the vans as a youth-oriented service.

Different styles of intervention

The work style of volunteers was also found to strengthen both the impression of altruism created among the adolescents, and the influence of that impression on them. Since volunteers are not bound by defined professional guidelines, they are able to reveal their desire to help, their personalities, their intuition, and accumulated life experience. As a result, as one adolescent who was interviewed noted, 'I don't have to conceal information from the van volunteers, because there's no way they'll set me up. So I can be more open with them.' Another pointed out:

> A professional is subject to specific rules, for example he's got less time, has to consult with his superiors, is less flexible and available for a relationship than a volunteer. The good thing about [name of a volunteer] is that she's got time; she can meet me whenever I want. It's not like [name of a staffer] you have to set up a meeting and it's complicated . . . volunteers are more flexible, you can get them on their mobiles, and call them when you're in a bad way.

The participatory observations also allowed us to see how a diverse group of volunteers facilitates communications with the youth and serves as a broad resource for support. Thus, we saw young people who preferred to talk with an older volunteer in the van, and later said that she was like a mother to them. On the other hand, some adolescents preferred to connect with a tough-looking military man, whom they could identify with more easily. A worker described a case that illustrates this broad sense of support:

> M., 18, worked as a male prostitute in a park. Lived with friends. Used soft drugs, and was very concerned about getting onto hard drugs. Created close ties with a volunteer who works in the army (IDF) – during their conversations, M. told him that he was about to be drafted to the IDF and wasn't sure he really wanted to. After numerous discussions, M. decided he would join up and the van team mobilized to help him. They sent a letter to the army, detailing M.'s life story and the opportunity that the army offered him to become a useful citizen. The volunteer got in touch with the military authorities and as a result, M. was drafted. M. was holding on in the army, and the volunteer sent him parcels for the holidays.

Creating a volunteer image for the service as a whole

According to the findings, the adolescents who knew that the van was staffed mainly by volunteers considered it to be an essentially non-establishment, altruistic, and volunteer project. Many times they related to the workers as volunteers, as well. The entire service was seen as voluntary in nature, and all the workers enjoyed the aura of volunteering. One youth interviewed defined his attitude to all the van workers: 'They aren't regular social workers. In this sense, they're like volunteers'. Thus a salient aspect of the impact of the volunteers was the enhanced reputation of the van service as altruistic in nature, which lowered the initial resistance to what was actually an institutionalized service. It should be noted that these perceptions of the van were probably influenced by other factors, too, such as the outreach work performed by the van teams, the informal meetings on the street, the unusual hours, and the relative emotional accessibility of the van. However, it seems that the presence of volunteers contributed to the impact of all these factors in building the youths' trust.

Volunteers as role models

For some of the street youths, the regular meetings with the volunteers and the options that opened up before them changed their priorities and motives; some even said they would like to volunteer to help others. A worker on the Tel Aviv van team mentioned the importance of role modeling, and said that the volunteers, by being volunteers, provided a positive identification model for the adolescents. In their everyday lives, these adolescents had rarely met people like the volunteers – people who find satisfaction in doing good things – and this was an inherent model for positive behavior. The Jerusalem van coordinator noted that a young woman told a volunteer, 'you see? I've learned something from you, I'm going to volunteer!' and actually did so.

Obstacles created by volunteer work

Not all influences of the volunteers were necessarily positive; assigning volunteers to the van often created obstacles to its operations. The first obstacle was related to the volunteers' commitment to work; often they could commit to limited periods only, which occasionally hampered activities. At most sites, regular staffers were required to build relationships of trust with the people they served. Rapid volunteer turnover disrupted continuity and, in turn, influenced developments at the site. For example, in one neighborhood,

which is considered an especially rough area with a population of distrustful youth, the fact that the van was staffed by professionals and the volunteers did not show up regularly compounded client suspicions and the inability to build relationships, and the site was closed.

Additionally, volunteers sometimes had other considerations and priorities, causing them to miss sessions and break the continuity of their work. On occasion, sessions were cancelled because volunteers unexpectedly failed to report for their shifts. Every such hitch had its consequences for maintaining contact with the youths.

Although these obstacles are not directly related to the perceived altruism of the volunteers and its impact on the adolescents, but rather to volunteer work, we present them here in order to provide a balanced picture of the volunteering and its impact. In addition, voluntary work also has organizational and administrative advantages, but these require further analysis that exceeds our present objective.

In summing up this presentation of the results of the research, we cite the words of a volunteer who developed several positive, in-depth, and long-lasting relationships with young people in the male prostitution park:

> It's important that the relationship is continuous, that the guys I'm in contact with know that they can always come to me when things get tough; that I can be a permanent place for them to turn, over time. Knowing that someone's looking out for them and listening is in itself empowering . . . In fact, I show them that there is another kind of life and I encourage them to get there, to believe in themselves, like I believe in them.

Discussion

Is bad really stronger than good? In an extensive review of various sources, including historical ones, Sorokin (1967) concludes that in social conflicts and relations, good intentions have the power to overcome bad ones. Baumeister et al. (2001), on the other hand, show that badness creates a stronger impression than goodness does. Our pilot study indicates the power of good. This pioneering attempt to study the unique impact of volunteers in the human services on their target population reveals the existence of an outstanding contribution, which affects the service as a whole. Volunteers who joined night-time outreach vans and met at-risk street youths succeeded in showing these young people a human order that contradicts the familiar 'law of the jungle', while also differing from the professionals. The street

youths perceived the volunteers as representing the highest level of altruistic motivation and thinking (Krebs & Van Hesteren, 1994), whether this was the case or not, and they responded to it positively.

Their reaction to meeting people who volunteered for their sake shifted their view of the world. Their perception of the volunteers as altruistic extended to the entire service, including its paid professional workers. The unmediated encounter with perceived altruism broadened the adolescents' awareness of what motivated people, and shook their evolving world view. In turn, they underwent a process of change, reflected in the attempt to re-enter the prevailing society and comply with its norms, and, especially, in the willingness of some to volunteer for the good of others. Unfortunately, it is too early to measure the magnitude of this impact, its extent, and its persistence over time.

In general, adolescents are considered to have self-centered, egocentric thinking and behavior (Elkind, 1967; Rankin et al., 2004). At-risk youths, who stay on the streets and struggle for their survival, usually demonstrate a high degree of self-centeredness (Gibbs, 1991). Self-centeredness is understood as preoccupation with one's self and its components, which may filter or obscure other matters. Self-centeredness may be present among people suffering various behavioral disorders (Ronel, 2000; Ronel & Libman, 2003; Ronel & Tim, 2003). It acts in a self-fulfilling manner; individuals who have a self-centered worldview may perceive the world in a way that is shaped by and sustains their self-centeredness. Usually, in this type of worldview, unconditional good is an unusual or nonexistent entity.

Life on the street includes a constant struggle for survival – social, emotional, and sometimes even physical (Kariv-Ben-Moshe, 2002). This struggle is an ever-lasting experience of self-centered motivations. However, the current results demonstrate how distinct goodness can penetrate self-centered individuals. Self-centered street youth succeeded in perceiving the good they encountered 'as is', and this perception stood in contradiction to their self-centered understanding of human relations and struggles.

One possible explanation, provided by humanistic psychology (for example, Lietaer, 1993; Ruthven, 1992), is based on the assumption that an individual must experience positive attitudes during the growth and development process. The life stories of adolescents in this study reveal constant struggles, with very few positive experiences. When they met the van teams, they encountered an unconditionally positive, empathetic attitude, which created a new existential experience for them. Humanistic psychology assumes that this attitude is a necessary condition for a successful therapeutic relationship (Rogers, 1957).

Our research shows that the youths considered the attitudes of

volunteers as more affirmative and empathetic, because they perceived the volunteers as altruistic. For them, volunteering exemplified the highest degree of congruence between the declared mission of the service – to care and to help – and its actual implementation. This congruence is also considered an essential condition for change. Moreover, the volunteers' informal attitude, which is reflected in the absence of a power hierarchy between them and the adolescents, and in the trustworthiness they showed the adolescents, also fits the humanistic perception of the therapeutic relationship, in particular, and human relations, in general (Brazier, 1993a). Thus, the work of the volunteers complied with the basic principles of the therapeutic encounter according to humanistic psychology, implemented with a population that is marginalized.

This interpretation can be taken one step further. Most individuals who have experienced almost exclusively self-centered human relations strive for a different kind of experience and seek a meaning to life that includes goodness. Individuals strive to experience goodness and consequently, to practice goodness (Brazier, 1993b). Post (2002) claims that individuals may remember for years those who gave them human warmth and altruistic love. Encountering volunteers, who are perceived to be altruistic, is such an experience. Volunteers serve as role models for the adolescents and create a distinctive social-moral atmosphere, totally different from that generally prevailing on the streets. According to the adolescents' perceptions, in this atmosphere of grace, goodness, manifest in willingness to give without asking for anything in return, is the accepted norm. Street youths, like any other self-centered population, greatly appreciate this norm, especially because they personally benefit from it. Gradually, as in other contexts where a high level of self-centeredness encounters such a 'grace atmosphere' (Ronel, 1998), several youth reveal a growing wish to be part of that atmosphere.

Individuals whose lives are characterized by self-centeredness are trapped in this narrow existence. Goodness, as perceived, bears the potential to extend one's experience to a different realm. Personally encountering the goodness of others has the power of relief, since it proves the existence of such ability. The perceived good of others suggests the possibility of survival without a constant struggle and a growing sense of a meaningful life. We can therefore conclude, parallel to the claims of positive psychology, that against the background of the accumulation of numerous unfavorable experiences, a decisively good one may have a strong impact. An experience of good, as our results indicate, may actually overcome bad ones under certain conditions yet unexplored. It seems that volunteers who are perceived as pure altruists may be able to inject this message of good into the lives of these people.

A central focus here is the perception of goodness. The findings indicate that perception of a positive intention or motivation is a major component of the impact of helping behavior. Therefore, I suggest the term 'perceived altruism', which emphasizes the importance of the subjective assessment of behavior as altruistic by its beneficiaries. It can be assumed that the more individuals have previously experienced alienation, neglect, hostility, and the need to struggle for existence (as is the case for street youth, as well as other groups), the more suspicious they will be of those helping them, and, therefore, the more they need to perceive this helping as unquestionably altruistic. As the perception of goodness and altruism contradict their former negative experience, it takes an especially strong positive perception to overcome barriers created by the past.

As noted earlier, the search for the meaning of good within human experiences may be attributed to the growing field of positive psychology. Gable and Haidt (2005), for example, claim that: 'there are only a few empirical studies of the positive moral emotions, the emotions we feel when others do good things' (p. 104). As this research suggests, good deeds may have a strong impact upon their beneficiaries. With due caution regarding the generalization of our results, the present research suggests a connection between personal ethics and human influence. For the at-risk youths, the volunteers perceived to be altruistic, who 'did good deeds', exemplified a higher-than-normal ethic, of unconditional giving. This seems to have been an important component in their ability to have an impact. Handelsman et al. (2002) call for a 'positive ethic' within positive psychology, and describe several essential principles of this ethic. I suggest that the unconditional will to act for the good of others is an important human virtue within this ethic that may fulfill a therapeutic need.

Several limitations of the current research should be noted. First, it is an explorative pilot study based on flexible methodology. Hence the results may indicate a possibility in human encounters, but they cannot be generalized. Second, the data were interpreted subjectively, and there may well be alternative interpretations. Third, the target population of at-risk street youth was not studied directly, limiting our ability to draw conclusions about their experience.

There are several possible directions for future research. First, a quantitative study is needed to evaluate the magnitude of the impact of the perceived altruistic good of volunteers. Such a study should include examination of the extent and duration of this impact. Second, the influence of goodness and of perceived altruism should be studied in different settings with different populations, to broaden our knowledge of its impact. Third, as self-centeredness is considered here as a key component in understanding

the impact of the good, future research might evaluate how altruism affects self-centeredness in different populations.

Note

1   I use the terms 'van team' and 'workers' here to refer to the salaried staff, compared with 'volunteers', which represents the non-salaried staff.

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