

## The Relationship between Collective Self-Esteem and Volunteer Engagement: The Mediating Role of Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction

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**Abstract:** The present study aimed to investigate the contribution of collective self-esteem (CSE) on volunteer engagement and the mediating role of basic psychological need satisfaction among volunteers. Offline survey with self-reported questionnaires was completed by 799 college students who had been involved in voluntary service. Results showed that volunteers' CSE were positively correlated with volunteer engagement. Furthermore, satisfaction of basic psychological needs mediated the relationship between CSE and volunteer engagement and the indirect effect accounted for 24.3% of the total effect. Findings suggested that the promotion of volunteers' CSE could satisfy their basic psychological need, which in turn motivated college students to be more engaged in volunteer activities.

**Key words:** Collective Self-Esteem • Volunteer Engagement • Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction  
• Volunteer

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### INTRODUCTION

Volunteering is a form of prosocial behavior. It differs from other prosocial behaviors in that it is a planned act of helping, that is, people will be more considered, selected and planned before volunteering [1, 2]. In other words, volunteering is planned, voluntary and constant prosocial behavior [1]. Penner [3] also, defines longevity, planfulness, non-obligatory helping and an organizational context as the four salient attributes of volunteering. Volunteering in China is in the midst of a new historical opportunity. It is growing fast and benefiting the society and individuals, while it is also faced with many challenges at the same time, such as the low level of engagement, short service cycle and high quit intention resulting from the utility purpose [4, 5]. Therefore, to improve the quality of volunteering, it is extremely necessary to investigate the volunteer engagement. Volunteers will provide high-quality service when they are energized by and dedicated to their volunteer work and enjoy being absorbed in their volunteer activities. Such a state can be described as volunteer engagement.

**Volunteer Engagement:** Volunteer engagement, as an extension of work engagement in the field of volunteering, is a positive, fulfilling, volunteer-related state of mind that

is characterized by an individual bringing his or her full capacity to the volunteer. Volunteer engagement mainly involves three aspects, vigor, dedication and absorption [6, 7]. Vigor refers to a commitment to work hard and volunteer with high levels of energy and mental resilience. Dedication refers to being actively involved in and passionate about volunteering, volunteers believing that the services they are engaged in are significant and they are proud and willing to rise to challenges. Absorption resembles Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow", refers to fully concentrating on volunteering service even without realizing the passage of time but experiencing happiness [8].

The previous research also investigated three types of influencing factors of volunteer engagement: individual characteristic factors (psychological state, personality characteristics, efficacy, identity, etc.) [9, 10], factors related to work organization (work resources, job requirements, organizational commitment, etc.) and family-related factors (family structure, etc.) [11]. Volunteer engagement differs from paid work engagement due to its gratuitousness [12]. So what drives volunteers into voluntary service without being paid? This study will explore factors of volunteer engagement and its inner mechanism by drawing on findings from paid employee literature and taking the speciality of China's volunteering into account meanwhile.

**Collective Self-esteem and Volunteer Engagement:** As a significant internal resource of individuals, self-esteem plays an important role in reducing job burnout [13-15] and stimulating work engagement. Katariina Salmala-Aro *et al.* [16] found that self-esteem could significantly predict work engagement and they two are also in a positive correlation through their longitudinal research spanning a decade (1996-2006). Core self-evaluations theory [17] assumed that self-efficacy, self-esteem, control points and emotional stability are four effective personality traits that affect job satisfaction, work engagement and job performance. Wang Ting *et al.* [18] also demonstrated the positive impact of core self-evaluation (including self-esteem), on work engagement.

Social identity theory divides self-esteem into personal self-esteem and collective self-esteem (CSE) [19]. Personal self-esteem comes from personal identity, while collective self-esteem comes from social identity. Collective self-esteem refers to an individual's perception of his or her membership as a social group and the evaluation of the value and sentiment as a member of this group [20]. CSE includes four dimensions: (1) membership CSE: the importance of himself the individual feels in the group; (2) private CSE: the individual's evaluation on the group's value; (3) public CSE: the individual's perception of others' evaluation on the value of the group; (4) identity CSE: the importance of the group to his or her personal identity [19]. Amid the Western individualistic culture, people's self-esteem is mainly personal or self-oriented, while China in the context of collectivist culture, which is influenced by the Confucian philosophical tradition, the value of a person depends on his or her being in a larger community [21]. In this case, the personal orientation of self-esteem is weakened and more attention is paid to the collective orientation of self-esteem. In addition, a volunteer service is social and organizational, individuals are more likely to form social identity rather than individual identity in volunteering activities. Therefore, this study will focus on collective self-esteem as the antecedent variable that may affect volunteer engagement. Collective self-esteem (CSE) has been generally associated with both professional and personal positive outcomes [19]. The study in art therapy and schooling field showed that CSE was positively correlated with work engagement [22] and negatively correlated with burnout [23]. In the context of Chinese collective culture, Wang Ting *et al.* [18] took CSE into the classic core self-evaluation and proved that job burnout and work engagement were significantly related. In the field of volunteer engagement, there were few empirical studies to reveal the relationship between CSE and

volunteer engagement. However we can draw on findings from paid employee literature to investigate collective self-esteem as a potential mechanism of volunteer engagement.

**Psychological Need Satisfaction:** Self-determination theory (SDT) emphasizes the effect of the satisfaction of individual psychology needs on positive individual outcomes [24, 25]. The basic psychological needs include: (1) autonomy: experiencing that behavior is self-selection and dominance; (2) competence: a sense of competence in activities and being capable of accomplishing the tasks; (3) relatedness: developing and maintaining a good relationship with others and gaining a sense of belonging [26]. The satisfaction of these basic psychological needs usually plays the role of the mediator to affect behavior outcomes. For instances, it can be the mediator between the relationships between person-environment fit (P-E fit) and job satisfaction, affective organizational commitment and job performance [27-29], as well as job resource and work engagement [30]. Therefore, we hypothesized that basic psychological need satisfaction can be a potential mediator of the relationship between CSE and volunteer engagement. On the one hand, the studies, undertaken in both paid employment and unpaid voluntary service environment, found that basic psychological need satisfaction is an important predictor of work engagement and quit intention [30-32]. On the other hand, the establishment and promotion of CSE can also meet the three basic psychological needs of individuals. High CSE enables individuals to feel his or her importance in the group, experience a higher level of efficacy in activities as a member of the group to meet the competence need. Individuals with high CSE also have a more positive attitude to their group, which enable them to gain a higher sense of identity and belonging and their relationship needs are satisfied. In addition, the process of establishing and promoting CSE is also a process in which individuals select and gradually establish social identity in accordance with their own values following their own will, thus satisfying their autonomy needs. Previous studies have also shown that basic need satisfaction was positively correlated with work engagement, both in volunteering and non-volunteer activities [24, 31, 32].

**The Present Study:** To sum up, the present study aimed to investigate the association between collective self-esteem and volunteer engagement and to explore whether this association is mediated by basic psychological need satisfaction. Specially, we would to test the following hypotheses (Hs):

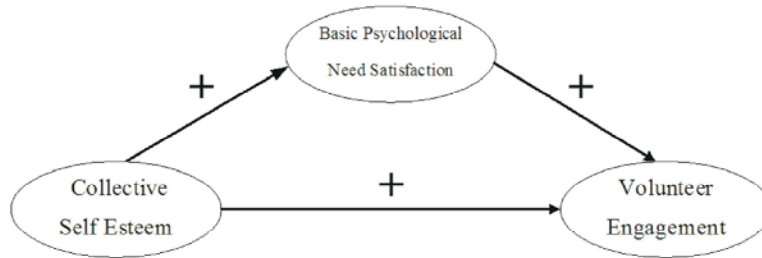


Fig. 1: A hypothesized model

H1: Collective self-esteem is positively associated with volunteer engagement;

H2: Basic psychological need satisfaction mediates the relationship between collective self-esteem and volunteer engagement.

A hypothesized model is depicted in Fig. 1.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Participants:** Convenient sample included 799 college students from 13 universities in Beijing with volunteer experience. Participants aged from 18 to 27 ( $M_{age} = 21.55$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ) and 212 males and 584 females (3 participants missed gender information).

**Measures:** In the present study, we measured collective self-esteem using the Collective Self-Esteem Scale [19], basic need satisfaction using the Basic Need Satisfaction at Work Scale [33] and volunteer engagement using the adapted version of Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) [34]. In addition, we included demographic questions concerning age, gender, place of residence, level of education, only-child or not and SES in the questionnaire. All questions were translated from English into Chinese by a professional translator. An English back-translation was conducted by another translator and this back-translation was compared with the original version.

**Collective Self-esteem Scale:** Luhtanen and Crocker's [19] collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSE) was used to measure volunteer's collective self-esteem. This scale consists of four subscales: membership CSE (4 items, e.g., 'I am a cooperative participant in the volunteer group I belong to.');

private CSE (4 items, e.g., 'I feel good about the volunteer group I belong to.');

public CSE (4 items, e.g., 'In general, others respect the volunteer group that I am a member of.')

and membership identity CSE (4 items, e.g., 'The volunteer group I belong to is an important reflection of who I am.'). All items were answered on a 7-point rating scale, ranging from totally

disagree to totally agree. The higher score represents the higher level of volunteer's collective self-esteem. In this study, the scale's Cronbach's alpha coefficients were respectively 0.72, 0.76, 0.71 and 0.63 in the four dimensions.

**Volunteer Engagement Scale:** We measured volunteer engagement with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) [34], adapted to Chinese volunteers. Responses to the nine items were on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 7 (Always). Sample questions of the three subscales include "During my volunteer work, I feel strong and vigorous" (vigor), "The volunteer work inspires me" (dedication) and "I am immersed in my volunteer work" (absorption). In our study, Cronbach's alphas of 0.92, 0.81, 0.92 and 0.76 were obtained for the Vigor, Dedication, Absorption subscales and global scale, respectively.

**Basic Need Satisfaction Scale:** This study refers to the practice of Haivas *et al.* [31], using the basic need satisfaction in general scale compiled by Johnston and Finney [33] as a pattern and replacing the words "work" *et al.* in terms of context with "voluntary service" or "voluntary service activities". The applied scales comprise autonomy need satisfaction (3 items; e.g., "I think I can free to decide how to complete my volunteer work.";  $\alpha=.61$ ), competence need satisfaction (6 items; e.g., "In volunteer service activities people tell me that I'm good at what I'm doing.";  $\alpha=.71$ ) and relatedness need satisfaction (7 items; e.g., "I really like the people in the volunteer service.";  $\alpha=.83$ ). Responses range from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree).

## RESULTS

**Descriptive Statistics:** The descriptive statistics include means (M), standard deviations (SD) and correlations of the main variables in the current study were reported in Table 1.

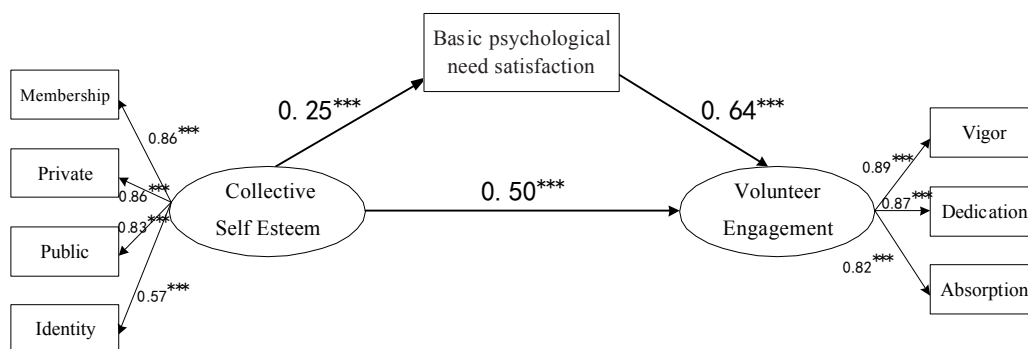


Fig. 2: The mediation effect of Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations of main variables (N = 799)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	-	-	1				
2. Age	21.55	1.77	-0.06	1			
3. Collective Self Esteem (CSE)	6.01	0.62	0.06	0.04	1		
4. Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction	5.79	0.60	-0.05	0.03	0.68***	1	
5. Volunteer Engagement	5.76	0.84	0.01	0.07*	0.59***	0.63***	1

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

Table 2: Statistical significance of direct and indirect effects

Model pathways	Standard Estimates	SE	Lower 2.5%	Upper 2.5%
Direct effect				
CSE → VE	0.502***	0.087	0.575	0.917
Indirect effect				
CSE → BPNS → VE Engagement	0.161***	0.055	0.091	0.231

SE: standard error;

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001

As shown in Table 1, the volunteer engagement was significantly positively correlated with the CSE and basic psychological need satisfaction, indicating that the higher the level of CSE and basic psychological need satisfaction, the higher the level of volunteer engagement. Meanwhile there was a positive correlation between CSE and basic psychological need satisfaction. In general, these findings are in line with our assumptions.

In addition, the correlation between age and volunteer engagement was significant, indicating that the level of volunteer engagement was elevated by age. While no significant correlation was found between gender and main variables. Except for gender and age, the MANOVA (Multivariate analysis of variance) revealed no main effect of other demographic variables (place of residence, only-child or not, SES) on the main variables (CSE and volunteer engagement,).

**Mediation Analyses:** SEM (structural equation modeling) analysis performed by Mplus 7.0 was used to test the mediation model. Age was entered as a control variable, since the positive correlation between age and volunteer engagement.

First, we established the direct effect model of CSE on volunteer engagement. The results showed that the model fits well:  $\chi^2/df = 3.55, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.986, TLI = 0.979, RMSEA = 0.057, SRMR = 0.031$ . CSE was positively correlated with volunteer engagement (standardized coefficient,  $\beta = 0.661, p < 0.001$ ).

Next, basic psychological need satisfaction was added as the mediator and bias-corrected bootstrapping analyses was performed to test the significance of the mediating effect. The model fit well:  $\chi^2/df = 4.14, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.980, TLI = 0.971, RMSEA = 0.063, SRMR = 0.038$ . The standardized path coefficients between variables, statistical significance of direct and indirect effects were shown in Fig. 2 and Table. 2. We applied 1000 bootstrap resamples with 95% bias-correlated confidence intervals and CI of basic psychological need satisfaction (CI=[0.091, 0.231]) path did not include zero, suggesting that basic psychological need satisfaction was a significant mediator between CSE and volunteer engagement. From the results of the model, the direct effect of CSE on volunteer engagement was still significant (CI=[-0.138, 0.408]) and the indirect effect accounted for 24.3% of the total effect. In other words,

CSE of volunteer was positively associated with basic psychological need satisfaction, which in turn was positively associated with higher levels of volunteer engagement.

## **DISCUSSION**

More efforts and attention should definitely be paid to the development of voluntary service in China, which is in a period of social transition nowadays. In the process of rapid development, with the emergence of various problems, the quality of voluntary service is becoming more and more important for the development of both voluntary organizations and social welfare in the long-term. This study explored the relationship between CSE and volunteer engagement. It is found that the CSE of volunteers is an effective predictor of volunteer engagement amid Chinese culture background. The social identity theory divides the human self-concept into two relatively independent sub-systems: individual identity and social identity [19]. The former focuses on the individual's identity with self-characteristics, roles, etc., thus forming individual self-esteem. The latter derives from people's membership and identity in different groups, which empower the individual certain emotional and value meaning, thus forming collective self-esteem [19, 20]. Amid western culture background, which focuses more on individual identity, it is shown in many studies that individuals' identity with their jobs and roles has a significant effect on their work engagement and volunteer engagement [35, 36]. Especially in the field of voluntary service, volunteers' role identity had been an important predictor of their intention to serve continually and volunteer engagement [37, 38]. China, whose mainstream is collectivist culture, pays more attention to collective self-esteem derived from social identity than the West, which pursues individualistic values [39]. Therefore, in the context of Chinese culture, this study supported the hypothesis of the positive impact of volunteers' collective self-esteem on their volunteer engagement, that is, the more positive volunteers evaluate and value the volunteer group, the more vigorous, energetic and dedicated they will be in volunteer service.

Why does volunteers' collective self-esteem prompt their volunteer engagement? This study explained the relationship between the two from the perspective of self-determination theory. It turned out that the positive association between CSE (including four dimensions) and volunteer engagement was significantly complete mediated by basic psychological need satisfaction,

suggesting that the overall CSE as well as its four dimensions, influenced volunteer engagement indirectly by meeting psychological needs. In one aspect, according to self-determination theory, if volunteers' basic psychological needs are satisfied in the process of voluntary service, that is, they have autonomy and competence in the voluntary activities and feel a sense of belonging in the volunteer group, their intrinsic motivation will be strengthened and the level of their volunteer engagement will be higher [24]. The result of this study also proved that the volunteers' basic psychological need satisfaction, including its various dimensions, is significantly related with the level of their volunteer engagement. In another aspect, we investigate CSE from the perspective of its four dimensions. First, that volunteers with high membership CSE means that they think they are important in the volunteer group, which gives them strong sense of competence. Second, private CSE and public CSE respectively represent volunteers' evaluation on the their volunteer community and the public evaluation they perceived from other communities, i.e., individuals with higher CSE are more likely to have positive views on the volunteer group [40] and thus it is easier for them to have stronger sense of belonging to their community and to build positive bond with other volunteers. Besides, if their volunteer community is highly evaluated, they will experience high self-efficiency, pride and value, etc. to achieve satisfaction, thus devoting themselves more actively into volunteering service. Finally, the higher the importance of volunteers to identity means that the identity of the volunteer group has a great influence on their self-concept, which is not only the result of volunteers' self-selection, but also the high sense of belonging to the volunteer group. In conclusion, in the process of engaging into voluntary activities, if volunteers feel themselves important in the volunteer group, they perceive positive evaluations from themselves as well as the public, they may take the volunteer group as a part of their own self-concept and establish their identity as a volunteer, then their basic psychological needs will be satisfied and more positively involve in voluntary service.

How to improve volunteers' volunteer engagement is an issue related to the field of volunteering research as well as a concern of relevant social departments and volunteering organizations. This study provided a new direction and solution for comprehensive research of this issue. It confirmed the impact of CSE on volunteer engagement especially in the context of Chinese collectivist culture and contributing to the impact

mechanism. In practice, to improve volunteer engagement, we should strengthen volunteers' CSE from its various dimensions to achieve their psychological need satisfaction. First, membership CSE inspires us to concern more about volunteers' efficiency, that is, to increase their ability in voluntary activities and demonstrate their social and personal value. Besides, as both private CSE and public CSE concern the evaluation of volunteers themselves and others on the volunteer group, suggesting the significance of advocacy. Through various panels of advocacy, including formal and informal, we can enhance the importance and reputation of voluntary service. As the result, on the one hand, volunteers' value of the volunteer group will be strengthened and their private CSE will also be prompted; on the other hand, if volunteers perceive encouragement and appreciation from the mainstream group, their public CSE will be enhanced. And to gain positive attitude of the public, volunteers are supposed to devote themselves more to their voluntary service, thus a virtuous circle formed.

There still existed some limitations in this study. First, this study used cross-sectional design and cannot perform causal inference. Longitudinal design can be used for further research. Besides, all the data is collected by self-report questionnaires, which may be susceptible to factors such as social desirability and not necessarily objective. Future investigative efforts should use multiple sources of information (such as the service object or voluntary organization manager) and incorporate mixed-methods.

### CONCLUSIONS

- Volunteer's collective self-esteem was positively correlated with volunteer engagement. Volunteers with higher level of CSE, will be more vigor, dedication and absorption in volunteering.
- The basic psychological need satisfaction mediates collective self-esteem's prediction effect on volunteer engagement.

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