Volunteer Reliability in Nonprofit Organizations: A Theoretical Model

Abstract
The reliability of volunteers is a major concern for many nonprofit organizations. To address this problem in more detail, we develop a theoretical model of volunteer reliability based on psychological contract theory. By taking this perspective as a starting point, we explore how individual volunteer characteristics, organizational factors, and sociological developments shape the exchange of inducements and contributions between volunteers and nonprofit organizations. We discuss how these factors can create tensions in the psychological contract and determine the extent to which volunteers behave reliably. As such, we develop a theoretical framework for addressing the reliability problem in volunteer management.

Keywords: volunteers, reliability, psychological contract, functional motives, volunteering styles, nonprofit professionalization, principal-agent
1. Introduction

The impact of volunteers on society should not be understated. In the USA, it is estimated that 62.6 million Americans (24.9% of the population) volunteered in 2015, donating 7.9 billion hours of their time and contributing services worth $184 billion to the economy (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2017). Despite the vast number of volunteers in the USA and in other countries (Anheier, 2014), many nonprofit organizations (NPOs) still struggle to manage their volunteers. For example, volunteer managers of sports events reported that they were mainly concerned about the reliability of their volunteers (Nichols & Ojala, 2009). They specifically expressed concerns that volunteers would decide to stay home at the day of the sports event, because it was raining or because their train was delayed. More broadly, issues of reliability occur because volunteers, in contrast to paid employees, can freely decide when, where, and how to perform activities and can easily withdraw from the NPO (Cnaan & Cascio, 1998; Pearce, 1993). Hence, ensuring reliable volunteer behavior is a key task for volunteer managers. We define volunteer reliability as the extent to which a volunteer completes explicitly agreed-upon assignments and delivers the contributions that he or she promised to the NPO. In other words, it captures the extent to which the NPO can depend on the volunteer (Cuskelly, Auld, Harrington, & Coleman, 2004). For example, a volunteer who agreed to help campaigning for a day but does not show up behaves unreliably.

The investigation of volunteer reliability has been hindered due to the lack of a theoretical framework for understanding what drives the behavior of volunteers (Van Puyvelde, 2016). First, most studies have focused on the reasons or motives of individuals to volunteer (e.g., Finkelstein & Brannick, 2007; Hustinx et al., 2010), thereby disregarding the behavior of people who have taken up volunteering. Second, the literature on volunteer management is fragmented, with contributions from various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, management, and economics. This fragmentation may have hindered progress in the volunteer management
literature, as studies often approached behaviors and attitudes of existing volunteers from a single point-of-view while overlooking insights from other perspectives. Third, volunteering studies need to take into account the unique characteristics of NPOs and volunteers (Cnaan & Cascio, 1998). This means that theories developed for paid employees in a for-profit context cannot be automatically applied to volunteers working in a nonprofit context. We address the previously mentioned gaps in the literature by developing a theoretical model of volunteer reliability. Our model relies on insights from psychological contract theory, which was developed originally in a for-profit context, but has been validated by a large body of literature in the nonprofit context (e.g., Farmer & Fedor, 1999; Nichols, 2013; Nichols & Ojala, 2009; Vantilborgh, 2015; Vantilborgh, Bidee, Pepermans, Griep, & Hofmans, 2016). In addition, apart from principal-agent theory, we build on theories developed specifically in the nonprofit context that have the potential to explain volunteer reliability issues through their influence on volunteers’ psychological contracts (Nichols, 2013; Vantilborgh et al., 2011). As such, the unique nature of volunteers operating in a nonprofit environment is central to our model.

Our model departs from the basic idea that volunteers and NPOs engage in an exchange agreement (Farmer & Fedor, 1999; Vantilborgh et al., 2012). Volunteers expect to receive certain non-pecuniary inducements in return for their own contributions, while NPOs offer certain inducements to elicit specific volunteer behaviors. These mutual obligations—in terms of inducements and contributions—are captured by the psychological contract, which forms the nexus of the exchange agreement (Rousseau, 1989). We extend the literature by exploring how individual volunteer characteristics (functional motives), organizational factors (volunteer coordination practices), and sociological developments (changes in volunteering style and nonprofit professionalization trends) shape the exchange of inducements and contributions between volunteers and NPOs. In more detail, we argue that these factors can create tensions in volunteers’ psychological contracts with the NPO and determine the extent to which they
behave reliably. Hence, our model offers a novel lens for understanding why volunteers behave (un)reliably, based on the psychological contract literature. This implies that our model focuses on volunteers’ behaviors (as opposed to paid staff members’ behavior or to volunteers’ attitudes regarding reliability) and on psychological contract processes (i.e., content, breach, and balance) to explain volunteer reliability.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we discuss volunteer reliability in more detail. Next, we elaborate on psychological contract theory, which is at the heart of our model. Subsequently, we discuss individual volunteer characteristics, organizational factors, and sociological developments that may influence the psychological contract between volunteers and NPOs. Finally, we analyze the theoretical and empirical implications of our model, and propose several avenues for future research.

2. Volunteer reliability

Volunteers often fulfill important roles in a NPO. However, if many of these volunteers do not show up, the NPO may be unable to accommodate its beneficiaries, which may threaten mission accomplishment and ultimately organizational survival. Unreliable behavior of volunteers thus forms an important concern for volunteer managers (Nichols & Ojala, 2009). Several scholars have argued that differences between volunteers and paid employees create difficulties for managing the former group. While in-role behavior is compulsory for paid employees, it is voluntary for volunteers (Farmer & Fedor, 1999). Moreover, the organization has less power to enforce role expectations for volunteers, compared to paid employees (Farmer & Fedor, 1999). Cnaan and Cascio (1998) suggest that this reduced power can be explained in several ways. First, volunteers are less dependent on their workplace than paid employees as the latter group risks losing pay, pension rights, health care benefits, and job security by quitting their job. Second, volunteers often affiliate with more than one organization, meaning that their
commitment is fragmented and that they can more easily disengage from a single organization. Third, volunteers feel less bound by the norms and values of their organization and instead attach more importance to their own values and norms. In sum, differences between volunteers and paid employees create challenges for volunteer managers who wish to elicit reliable volunteer performance.

Some volunteer managers attempt to overcome these challenges by reducing the responsibilities of volunteers or by asking for more help to ensure that sufficient volunteers turn up (Nichols & Ojala, 2009). A theoretical model explaining why volunteers perform (un)reliably, however, remains missing in the literature (Van Puyvelde, 2016). We believe that such a framework may help volunteer managers to formulate answers to the abovementioned challenge. We approach reliability in volunteer performance from a psychological contract perspective. NPOs require volunteers to make certain contributions (e.g. arrive on time, perform ones tasks) to reliably offer services to beneficiaries. Volunteers make these contributions in return for certain inducements (e.g. recognition, social contacts). Hence, an exchange agreement exists between both parties (Farmer & Fedor, 1999; Vantilborgh et al., 2012); if this exchange agreement becomes threatened, issues of reliability arise owing to volunteers withholding or changing the nature of their contributions. Note that our model does not consider reliability as a personality trait of volunteers, such as conscientiousness in the Five Factor Model of personality (McCrae & John, 1992). Treating reliability as a stable personality trait would imply that some volunteers are more reliable than others in general. However, recent research demonstrates that there is considerable day-to-day variation in personality, distinguishing fluctuating states from stable traits (e.g., Beckmann, Wood, & Minbashian, 2010). In line with this state perspective, we view reliability as a behavior that fluctuates over time: our model proposes that changes in the exchange agreement between a volunteer and an NPO may lead to the volunteer behaving more or less reliable.
Figure 1 presents our model of volunteer reliability in NPOs. As mentioned above, we propose that issues of reliability arise as a result of tensions in the exchange agreement between the volunteer and the NPO. In more detail, by taking psychological contract theory as a starting point, we explore how individual volunteer characteristics (functional motives), organizational factors (volunteer coordination practices), and sociological developments (changes in volunteering style and nonprofit professionalization trends) shape the exchange of inducements and contributions between volunteers and NPOs. A review of the volunteering literature suggests that these factors may create tensions in the psychological contract, which in turn may lead to issues of volunteer reliability in NPOs.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

3. The psychological contract

Psychological contracts—defined as an individual’s perception of mutual obligations between her- or himself and another party (Rousseau, 1989)—originate from social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). People in an exchange agreement with an organization believe that this organization is obligated to provide them certain inducements; in return, they feel obligated to reciprocate with certain contributions (Rousseau, 1995). Inducements and contributions need not be promised explicitly to become a part of the psychological contract; people can also believe that an inducement or contribution was promised implicitly (Rousseau, 1995). For example, a volunteer may believe that an organization promised to recognize efforts because the organization’s website mentions that they attach strong importance to recognizing volunteers and due to other volunteers being recognized for their input. Hence, while recognition was not explicitly promised to this volunteer, he or she may come to believe that gaining recognition is a part of the psychological contract with the organization. The result of
this implicit character of the psychological contract is that they are idiosyncratic (Rousseau, 1989). While an organization can explicitly promise the same inducements to two different volunteers, they may nonetheless have distinct beliefs of the mutual obligations in their psychological contract.

Based on the nature of the inducements and contributions that are exchanged between both parties, different psychological contract types can be distinguished. The most common distinction is that between transactional and relational psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1990). Transactional psychological contracts imply the exchange of tangible, material inducements and contributions within a well-defined, short-term time frame. For example, in return for fulfilling their basic role requirements, volunteers expect to be reimbursed for the expenses they made. Relational psychological contracts involve the exchange of intangible, socio-emotional inducements and contributions within a vaguely defined, long-term time frame. For example, volunteers may expect to be recognized by the NPO in return for being loyal to this organization. A novel addition to these two types that is particularly relevant in the volunteering context is the ideological psychological contract type (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003; Vantilborgh et al., 2012). Ideological psychological contracts include the exchange of inducements and contributions that are closely related to the mission, values, and norms of the organization. For example, volunteers may have the ability to make a valuable direct contribution to the mission in return for publicly advocating the organization’s values.

Although volunteers perceive a mix of transactional, relational, and ideological obligations, a psychological contract with strong relational obligations is usually preferred because this has been associated with positive outcomes such as increased satisfaction, increased commitment, and decreased turnover intentions (Raja, Johns, & Ntalianis, 2004). Ideological contracts appear to be a double-edged sword, as they have been related to strong feelings of commitment and high levels of performance, but also to feelings of burnout.
(Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Transactional contracts generally relate to negative outcomes, such as decreased satisfaction and commitment, increased turnover intentions (Raja et al., 2004), and decreased performance by volunteers (Vantilborgh et al., 2013b).

3.1. Psychological contract breach

Psychological contracts mainly influence how people feel, think, and behave because the mutual obligations in the exchange agreement have the potential to be fulfilled or breached (Conway & Briner, 2009; Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Perceptions of psychological contract breach arise when a person notices that there is a discrepancy between what the organization promised and what the organization is actually delivering (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). These perceptions of psychological contract breach and fulfillment are a key factor in explaining people’s reactions to daily events, because they are used to regulate behavior. Self-regulation is an important underlying mechanism of the psychological contract, and can be described as an internal guidance system that people use to track their progress towards goals (Tomprou, Rousseau, & Hansen, 2015). People will try to reduce or eliminate any discrepancy (i.e., a breach) between the obligations in their psychological contract and the actual daily experience with their employer, for example by changing their own behavior or by renegotiating their psychological contract (Tomprou et al., 2015). A plethora of research shows that paid employees who perceive a breach in their psychological contract display (1) lower levels of organizational trust, commitment, job satisfaction, proactive behaviors, and in-role performance; and (2) increased levels of counter-productive work behaviors and turnover intentions (e.g. Bal, Chiaburu, & Diaz, 2011; Chao, Cheung, & Wu, 2011; Jensen, Opland, & Ryan, 2009; Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2006; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007). Such reactions to perceptions of breach are, however, not limited to paid employees. Volunteers show similar responses to breach perceptions. For example, they may lower their work effort, voice
their complaints, reduce the amount of time they work for the NPO, or even leave the NPO upon perceiving a breach (Starnes, 2007; Vantilborgh et al., 2014; Vantilborgh, 2015).

If issues of reliability are understood as volunteers not delivering the expected contributions to the organization, one might argue that such issues are a form of psychological contract breach by the volunteer himself. The majority of the literature focuses on breaches by the organization, but both parties can breach obligations in the psychological contract (Tekleab & Taylor, 2003). An organization can breach the contract by not delivering the inducements that were promised to the volunteer, while a volunteer can breach the contract by not delivering the contributions that were promised to the organization. A volunteer not delivering certain promised contributions, such as arriving timely at meetings, may invariably create issues of reliability for volunteer managers. This breach on behalf of the volunteer—i.e. not delivering certain promised contributions—may, however, be the result of that volunteer perceiving a breach on behalf of the organization—i.e. not delivering certain promised inducements. In other words, a breach by the organization may be reciprocated with a breach by the volunteer (Gouldner, 1960). In line with this norm of reciprocity, research indeed shows that people adjust their own contributions when they perceive that their organization breached certain promised inducements (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002). From this reasoning follows that perceptions of psychological contract breach by the organization may lead to psychological contract breach by the volunteer, thereby creating issues of reliability for volunteer managers (see Figure 1).

**Proposition 1.** Psychological contract breach by the NPO leads to psychological contract breach by the volunteer, thereby introducing issues of reliability in volunteer management.
3.2. Psychological contract balance

Perceptions of the degree of balance in the psychological contract, next to perceptions of breach, are also an important factor in explaining volunteers’ behaviors (Vantilborgh et al., 2013a). Whereas perceptions of breach involve a comparison between promised and delivered inducements or contributions, perceptions of balance involve a comparison of the inducements that are exchanged in return for contributions (De Cuyper, Rigotti, Witte, & Mohr, 2008; de Jong, Schalk, & De Cuyper, 2009; Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997). For example, when a person notices that there is a discrepancy between the inducements that were promised by the organization and the contribution that were promised by him- or herself, the psychological contract is said to be imbalanced. Volunteers can form an opinion with regard to the degree of balance between promised inducements and contributions (promise-based balance) and between delivered inducements and contributions (fulfillment-based balance) (de Jong et al., 2009). For both promise- and fulfillment-based balance, the discrepancy between inducements and contributions can be categorized by four types (De Cuyper et al., 2008; Tsui et al., 1997). First, perceptions of *mutual high obligations* emerge when a volunteer believes that a high level of inducements is exchanged for a high level of contributions. Second, perceptions of *mutual low obligations* emerge when a volunteer believes that a low level of inducements is exchanged for a low level of contributions. Third, perceptions of *organization over-obligation* arise when a volunteer believes that a high level of inducements is exchanged for a low level of contributions. Fourth, perceptions of *organization under-obligation* arise when a volunteer believes that a low level of inducements is exchanged for a high level of contributions. The first and second situations imply that the psychological contract is balanced, while the third and fourth situations imply an imbalanced psychological contract. People generally attempt to have a balanced psychological contract (De Cuyper et al., 2008). If their psychological contract is imbalanced, the norm of reciprocity dictates that they will take steps to regain balance.
(Gouldner, 1960). For example, they may alter their own contributions or renegotiate the exchange agreement to alter the level of inducements. Research has shown that most people report a balanced psychological contract, and that mutual high-obligations lead to better outcomes than mutual low obligations, organization over-obligation or organization under-obligation (De Cuyper et al., 2008; de Jong et al., 2009).

Similar to perceptions of psychological contract breach, volunteers’ perceptions of the degree of balance in the psychological contract may explain the emergence of reliability issues in volunteer management. In case of organization under-obligation, volunteers may decide to withhold their own contributions to regain balance in the psychological contract (Vantilborgh et al., 2013a). For example, a volunteer who perceives that he has to donate 20 hours per week but receives little to nothing in return—e.g. in the form of recognition or social contacts—may decide to donate less time. This may result in the volunteer no longer delivering the contributions that he or she promised to the organization, which may threaten the provision of services to beneficiaries and introduce reliability issues in volunteer management. In case of organization over-obligation, social exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity suggest that people will increase their own contributions to rebalance the exchange agreement (Gouldner, 1960). Paradoxically, research suggests that volunteers who experience organization over-obligation may instead decide to lower their own contributions (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008; Vantilborgh et al., 2013a). For volunteers, receiving a high level of inducements by the organization may signal that the organization is successful and has sufficient resources. As a result, volunteers may conclude that their contributions are more needed elsewhere and may decide to withhold their contributions in the current organization in favor of another, less successful, organization. This may again introduce issues of reliability, because the unexpected loss of donated time needs to be compensated by other volunteers. In sum, we propose that a balance between the exchanged inducements and contributions (i.e., mutual low or mutual high
obligations) represents an optimal point where volunteers will behave reliably. However, as illustrated by Figure 1, we propose that when an imbalance occurs, either due to the organization offering fewer inducements compared to the contributions offered by the volunteer (organization under-obligation) or the organization offering more inducements compared to the contributions offered by the volunteer (organization over-obligation), issues of reliability will emerge because volunteers will withhold their own contributions.

**Proposition 2.** Promise- and fulfillment-based imbalance (organization over-obligation or organization under-obligation) in the psychological contract between the volunteer and the NPO introduces issues of reliability in volunteer management.

4. Factors influencing the psychological contract between the volunteer and the NPO

4.1. Individual volunteer characteristics

According to functional motives theory (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Clary et al., 1998), volunteering serves six functions for individuals. First, volunteering allows people to express personal altruistic values, such as helping others and contributing to society (*values* motive). Second, people may desire to learn new skills, knowledge, and abilities through volunteering or practice existing ones (*understanding* motive). Third, people can meet new friends through volunteering or engage in activities that their friends find important (*social* motive). Fourth, volunteerism can be a means to increase one’s job prospects or to obtain specific career-related benefits, such as an enhanced curriculum vita (*career* motive). Fifth, volunteering is also a way to compensate for one’s own negative feelings, such as escaping from one’s own problems or reducing one’s feelings of guilt over being more fortunate than others (*protective* motive). Finally, people may decide to volunteer because it increases their positive feelings or enhances their self-esteem and self-confidence (*enhancement* motive).
Volunteers’ functional motives can have an influence on their behavior (Clary et al., 1998). More specifically, when there is a match between the inducements offered by the NPO and the motives that a person finds important, it is more likely that this person will volunteer for the NPO. This implies that people will seek out exchange agreements with incentives that match their motives. For example, a person with a strong values functional motive (e.g., a desire to volunteer for an organization that helps cancer patients), is likely to seek out an organization in which incentives related to this values functional motive are offered (e.g., the organization promises to dedicate a large sum of its financial means towards helping its beneficiaries), leading to the development of an ideological psychological contract. This argument has also been made in the psychological contract literature, which states that a person’s values and personality will influence the type of psychological contract that is sought out (Lambert, 2011; Raja et al., 2004). Tentative support for this argument can also be found in the volunteering literature, as it has been demonstrated that people with a strong career motive are more likely to report a transactional psychological contract (Liao-Troth, 2005). The remaining five functional motives are, however, not related to transactional or relational psychological contracts of volunteers. This might be because the transactional-relational-ideological typology describes the psychological contract as a whole, whereas the functional motives pertain more to the specific inducements that are desired by volunteers. Consequently, we propose that the functional motives of a volunteer define which specific inducements are functionally relevant to the volunteer, and therefore desired and sought by the volunteer.

Proposition 3(a). A volunteer’s functional motives determine the specific inducements that are desired by the volunteer in the exchange agreement with the NPO.
Regarding motives to quit volunteering, previous research has pointed out that these are not symmetrical to motives to quit volunteering (Willems et al., 2012). This implies that when a NPO fails to provide functionally relevant inducements to its volunteers, they may decide to remain with the NPO rather than immediately leaving it. In this case, however, they will reciprocate to the NPO’s psychological contract breach by lowering their own contributions, thereby creating reliability issues for volunteer managers. The psychological contract literature states that the importance attached to the inducement that is part of the psychological contract breach determines the intensity of the reaction to the breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). When a promised inducement that is functionally relevant—and hence personally important—is not provided, there will be a stronger reduction in contributions by the volunteer, compared to when that promised inducement is not functionally relevant. For example, if a volunteer has a strong values functional motive, he is expected to react more strongly to psychological contract breaches of inducements related to that values functional motive (e.g., a strong reaction by the volunteer when he perceives that the organization abuses financial resources for personal gains instead of helping its beneficiaries). In sum, we propose that the extent to which the inducement is functionally relevant moderates the volunteer’s reaction to the NPO’s psychological contract breach, creating greater issues of reliability in case of higher functional relevance.

**Proposition 3(b).** The functional relevance of the inducement that is central to the perception of psychological contract breach by the NPO moderates the volunteer’s reaction to that breach.

### 4.2. Organizational factors

Besides individual volunteer characteristics, organizational factors such as volunteer coordination practices may also affect the psychological contract between the volunteer and the
NPO. Volunteer coordination refers to “gaining, orientating, retaining, and organizing volunteers in a formal organization to provide a public good” (Studer and von Schnurbein, 2013: 406). Only a number of studies, mostly from a human resource management perspective, have explored volunteer coordination practices in NPOs (see Studer and von Schnurbein (2013) for an overview). From an economic perspective, principal-agent theory may provide additional insights into organizational practices and the performance of volunteers in NPOs (Van Puyvelde et al., 2012). A principal-agent relationship can be defined as “a contract under which one or more persons (the principal[s]) engage another person (the agent) to perform some service on their behalf which involves some decision making authority to the agent” (Jensen & Meckling, 1976: 308). A similar situation occurs when a volunteer is active with an NPO: although the contract between the volunteer and the NPO is mostly not written, the volunteer will be asked to perform certain tasks for the NPO, which will involve a transfer of decision-making power from the NPO to the volunteer. As a result, volunteers (agents) need to be controlled by managers (principals) in order to avoid potential agency problems in the NPO. For example, although income is no part of the volunteers’ utility function, personal goals such as reputation or specific client goals may outweigh the organization’s goals (Van Puyvelde et al., 2012).

According to principal-agent theory, financial incentives can be used to align the agent’s interests with those of the principal (Holmstrom and Milgrom, 1991). For volunteers, of course, this option is not possible. Therefore, one way to solve the principal-agent problem between volunteers and their coordinator is the use of incentive packages. Empirical research on nonprofit workers suggests that NPOs should take into account their workers’ motivations when constructing incentive packages (Borzaga and Tortia, 2006; Van Puyvelde et al., 2013). Furthermore, rather than using explicit incentives (i.e. performance contracts), a more deliberate use of implicit incentives (i.e. not contractually defined incentives) is usually recommended (Speckbacher, 2013). Borzaga and Tortia (2006) propose a mix of self-regarding, process-
related, and other-regarding incentives for employees in NPOs. *Self-regarding incentives* refer to monetary extrinsic incentives (e.g. wages and bonus payments), non-monetary extrinsic incentives (e.g. health insurance and retirement plans), and relational incentives (e.g. engage in meaningful relationships with other stakeholders). *Process-related incentives* involve procedures and codes that recognize employees’ contributions (e.g. offering variety and creativity of work), and *other-regarding incentives* serve to satisfy individuals’ altruistic desire to help others (e.g. the social usefulness of the job).

We argue that a similar incentive mix as the one proposed by Borzaga and Tortia (2006), but without extrinsic incentives, can also be used for managing volunteers in NPOs. In this regard, decisions by the nonprofit board related to the development of incentive packages are highly likely to influence the content of the psychological contract with volunteers. For example, the decision by a board to stop reimbursing travel expenses of volunteers makes it highly unlikely for volunteers to develop expectations related to reimbursements of expenses in return for the time they donate to the organization. An incentive package can therefore be said to have a signaling function, just as other human resources practices, for the development of an individual’s psychological contract (Suazo, Martínez, & Sandoval, 2009). However, as is the case for paid employees, incentive packages for volunteers are also characterized by a trade-off between different incentive components. Borzaga and Tortia (2006) argue that the decision of a NPO to focus on one or more incentive types depends on the cost differences in producing them and the organization’s ability to satisfy them. Van Puyvelde et al. (2013) suggest that NPOs may also try to differentiate themselves from others in the field by focusing on a particular set or subset of incentives. Furthermore, the size of the NPO may also affect the composition of the incentive package, as “volunteer management in large organizations tends to be better resourced, more structured and formalized” (Machin and Paine, 2008, p. 40). However, changing the incentive mix may create a mismatch between the incentives offered by
the NPO and the benefits desired by the volunteer. As volunteers may no longer be receiving the benefits that they expect, they can breach their psychological contract with the NPO by no longer delivering the contributions that they initially promised to the organization, thereby creating issues of reliability for volunteer managers.

**Proposition 4.** Changing the incentive package offered to a volunteer can create a mismatch between the incentives offered by the NPO and the volunteer’s desired benefits. This can cause issues of reliability, owing to an increased likelihood of psychological contract breach.

### 4.3. Sociological developments

From a sociological perspective, it has been argued that the nature of volunteering is changing from old to new forms (Eckstein, 2001; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Salamon, 1999). This changing nature of volunteering is believed to influence the contributions of volunteers and may cause issues related to the reliability of volunteers. At the same time, it has been argued that the effects of the changing nature of volunteering need to be considered in view of a second ongoing evolution, namely the increasing professionalization of NPOs. In this regard, Vantilborgh and colleagues (2011) propose that both evolutions—that is, the changing nature of volunteering and the increasing professionalization of NPOs—are related and both impact the psychological contract of volunteers.

**4.3.1. Volunteering styles**

The changing nature of volunteering has been described as a shift from *collective* to *reflexive* volunteering styles (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Vantilborgh et al., 2011; Van Puyvelde, 2016). A collective volunteering style is characterized by long-term, unconditional, and regular volunteer commitment (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003), and linked to strong feelings of
belonging to a group and feelings of kinship (Eckstein, 2001). It is initiated and coordinated by the group, and preferences of individuals are secondary to those of the group (Vantilborgh et al., 2011). Consequently, a strong group-identity will emerge. In addition, because collective volunteers share the NPO’s goals and display a high involvement, they will typically fulfill critical roles in the NPO (Eckstein, 2001; Pearce, 1993). From a psychological contract perspective, collective volunteers will develop a relational/ideological contract with the NPO (Vantilborgh et al., 2011). However, when certain relational or ideological inducements—such as autonomy or recognition—are not provided by the NPO (i.e. relational/ideological contract breach), collective volunteers can react by lowering their contributions for the NPO. This may create issues of reliability that are especially worrisome given their central role in the NPO. In contrast, a failure to provide transactional inducements may go unnoticed because collective volunteers only attach low importance to these inducements (Vantilborgh et al., 2011). We therefore propose that for collective volunteers, issues of reliability are more likely to arise in case of relational and ideological contract breaches than in case of transactional contract breaches.

A reflexive volunteering style is characterized by a summation of separate, short-term volunteering episodes that are determined by specific individual objectives, needs, and conditions (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). In contrast to the collective volunteering style, the focus lies with the individual instead of the group. Because individuals volunteer when it is relevant to them and fits into their other activities, they will require a high level of flexibility from the NPO and prefer short-term project-based assignments with tangible payoffs (Anheier & Salamon, 1999; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). In terms of the psychological contract, reflexive volunteers will develop a transactional contract with the NPO (Vantilborgh et al., 2011). However, when the NPO fails to provide transactional inducements (i.e. transactional contract breach), they may react by reducing their own contributions, thereby also creating
issues of reliability in volunteer management. In contrast, when the NPO fails to provide relational or ideological inducements, this may not be noticed by reflexive volunteers because they do not value relational and ideological inducements as highly as transactional inducements (Vantilborgh et al., 2011). In sum, we propose that for reflexive volunteers, issues of reliability are more likely to arise in case of transactional contract breaches than in case of relational and ideological contract breaches. This means that we expect that volunteering style (collective versus reflexive volunteers) will interact with psychological contract type (transactional, relational, ideological) to explain issues of reliability in volunteer management.

**Proposition 5.** Volunteering style and psychological contract type interact when explaining issues of reliability, such that transactional contract breaches will lead to issues of reliability for reflexive volunteers, while relational and ideological contract breaches will lead to issues of reliability for collective volunteers.

4.3.2. Nonprofit professionalization trends

Next to the aforementioned evolution in volunteering style, NPOs also seem to become more professionalized (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Maier & Meyer, 2016; Salamon, 1999; Weisbrod, 1998). Previous literature has shown that NPOs are increasingly adopting “activities, strategies, practices, policies, and knowledge from corporate for-profit organizations” (Vantilborgh et al., 2011, p. 645). This translates into an increased use of business-like organization, goals, and rhetoric (Maier & Meyer, 2016). Examples include conducting commercial activities to obtain additional revenues (Anheier, 2009; Gras & Mendoza-Abarca, 2014), hiring paid staff (Hwang & Powell, 2009), and using professional management tools such as cost-benefit analyses (Myers & Sacks, 2003). Several factors may stimulate NPOs to professionalize (Vantilborgh et al., 2011; Van Puyvelde, 2016). First, to acquire public funding,
NPOs not only have to compete with other NPOs, but also with for-profit firms (Sanders & McClellan, 2014). Consequently, NPOs have changed their practices and policies to remain competitive (Ryan, 2002). Second, given that private donors and governments may expect a clear ‘return-on-investment’ from their donations or subsidies, they require greater accountability from the NPO (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2010; Vantilborgh et al., 2011). Third, because of the decrease in both public and private funding, NPOs are increasingly pursuing commercial incomes (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). Fourth, the increasing prevalence of hybrid organizations that combine different logics (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Pache & Insead, 2013), such as social enterprises that combine social welfare logics with for-profit market logics, have legitimized the use of for-profit managerial practices in NPOs (Dart, 2004). For example, combining these distinct logics creates several tensions for social enterprises, such as whether volunteers should be seen as valuable resources or as amateurs that might better be replaced by paid staff (Jay, 2013; Gonin, Besharov, Smith, & Gachet, 2013; Pache & Insead, 2013). Some organizations have answered these tensions by professionalizing and by becoming more business-like (Sanders & McClellan, 2014). Finally, it is worth noting that NPOs may become more professionalized as they grow. In response to the challenge of managing larger groups of volunteers and paid staff, organizations tend to become more professionalized and bureaucratized (Montagna, 1968). Hence, the size of an NPO may also be an important factor that determines its level of professionalization.

Professionalization may introduce a tension between a volunteer and a managerial identity (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2010). Non-professionalized NPOs adhere to a volunteer identity. They rely on a core group of dedicated volunteers, place a high amount of trust in them, and aim to engage them in the long-term for a wide variety of tasks (Vantilborgh et al., 2011). Professionalized NPOs, in contrast, try to combine a volunteer identity with a managerial identity (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2010). They recruit volunteers into specific projects and ask them
to perform a limited set of well-defined tasks (Meijs & Brudney, 2007). In addition, because NPOs should demonstrate accountability to external stakeholders such as clients and donors (Hwang & Powell, 2009; Pache & Insead, 2013; Van Puyvelde, Caers, Du Bois, & Jegers, 2012), they will allocate core tasks to paid employees instead of volunteers. This implies that professionalized NPOs place a lower amount of trust in volunteers and aim to engage them in short-term exchanges that are less critical to functioning of the organization. In line with Vantilborgh et al. (2011), we therefore assume that the degree of professionalization influences the psychological contract between volunteers and the NPO. More specifically, we expect that non-professionalized NPOs will try to develop relational psychological contracts, and professionalized NPOs will focus on the development of transactional psychological contracts.

**Proposition 6(a).** Non-professionalized NPOs will try to develop relational psychological contracts, whereas professionalized NPOs will try to develop transactional psychological contracts with their volunteers.

In addition, issues of reliability may stimulate NPOs to professionalize. When NPOs experience problems with ensuring that volunteers reliably provide services for beneficiaries and perform key tasks, they may decide to replace volunteers by professionals (Hwang & Powell, 2009). In such cases, volunteers may only be required to perform minor, well-specified tasks in a short-term exchange agreement, because the NPO no longer trusts volunteers to perform key tasks.

**Proposition 6(b).** Issues of reliability may stimulate NPOs to become more professionalized.

Proposition 6(b) implies that issues of reliability are more than just a dependent variable in our model. Organizations react to their environment, meaning that feedback loops are likely to exist.
between organizational policies such professionalization and issues of reliability. For example, an NPO that faces issues of reliability may decide to professionalize, in the hopes of reducing these issues. However, this professionalization may inadvertently cause even more issues of reliability, because the transactional psychological contracts that are supported by professionalized NPOs no longer match the needs of collective volunteers. Vantilborgh and colleagues (2011) indeed propose that there needs to be a match between volunteering style and the degree of NPO professionalization. Collective volunteers may feel more at ease in non-professionalized NPOs, because there is a match in both parties’ long-term and intensive perspectives on the exchange agreement. Reflexive volunteers, in contrast, may feel more at home in professionalized NPOs, due to the match in both parties’ short-term and well-defined views on the exchange agreement. However, a mismatch may occur when a person with a collective volunteering style becomes confronted with increasing professionalization in the NPO. In this case, the transactional inducements offered by the organization are no longer congruent with the relational inducements expected by the volunteer. A mismatch can also occur when a reflexive volunteer participates in a non-professionalized NPO. In this case, the relational inducements offered by the organization are not congruent with the transactional inducements expected by the volunteer. In sum, we argue that a mismatch between a person’s volunteering style and the NPO’s degree of professionalization may lead to perceptions of psychological contract breach, and ultimately, issues of reliability for volunteer managers.

**Proposition 7.** A mismatch between an individual’s volunteering style and the NPO’s degree of professionalization will cause issues of reliability, owing to an increased likelihood of psychological contract breach.
5. A theoretical model of volunteer reliability

The theoretical model developed in this study focuses on explaining issues of reliability in volunteer management (see Figure 1). We theorized that these issues can arise from problems in the exchange agreement between volunteers and their NPO. This exchange agreement is characterized by four elements: the NPO promises certain inducements in return for certain contributions by the volunteer; analogously, the volunteer delivers specific contributions in return for certain inducements offered by the NPO. Problems of reliability may emerge because the inducements/contributions that are delivered by the NPO/volunteer can deviate from the inducements/contributions that were promised (i.e. psychological contract breach). In addition, problems of reliability may emerge when there is an imbalance between the promised inducements and contributions or between the delivered inducements and contributions (i.e. psychological contract balance). The nature of the promised and delivered inducements and contributions, as well as the reaction to breach and balance, can be understood using psychological contract theory.

Next to explaining why issues of reliability arise, the psychological contract also can also be seen as a linking pin tying together insights from various domains to the issue of reliability in volunteer management. First, by integrating psychological contract theory with functional motives theory, we proposed that volunteers’ functional motives will determine the specific inducements that are desired by volunteers. In other words, volunteers are expected to seek out exchange agreements that offer functionally relevant inducements. Furthermore, volunteers’ functional motives will also moderate their reaction to psychological contract breach. If the breach pertains to a functionally relevant inducement, their reaction as well as the ensuing issues of reliability will be more severe. Second, organizational factors such as volunteer coordination practices may also affect the psychological contract between the volunteer and the NPO. We suggested that the relationship between NPO managers and volunteers could be seen as a
principal-agent relationship, and incentive packages could be used to align the interests of principals (managers) and agents (volunteers). Both principal-agent theory and psychological contract theory focus on the relationship between a volunteer and an NPO. However, whereas principal-agent theory emphasizes formal aspects of the relationship from a top-down perspective, psychological contract theory focuses on informal aspects of the relationship from a bottom-up perspective. We proposed that changing the incentive package offered to a volunteer can create a mismatch between the incentives offered by the NPO and the volunteer’s desired benefits. This can cause issues of reliability, owing to an increased likelihood of psychological contract breach. Third, based on sociological perspectives, we proposed that the level of professionalization in a NPO influences the type of inducements promised to volunteers. NPOs with a high level of professionalization will be more likely to develop transactional psychological contracts with their volunteers, whereas NPOs with a low level of professionalization will be more likely to develop relational and ideological psychological contracts with their volunteers. In addition, a person’s volunteering style is also proposed to moderate the reaction to psychological contract breach. Collective volunteers will react more intensely in case of relational or ideological breaches, whereas reflexive volunteers will react more intensely in case of transactional breaches. Finally, we also suggested that a mismatch between the level of professionalization in a NPO and a person’s volunteering style will increase the likelihood to perceive psychological contract breaches, as there may be an incongruence between both parties’ expectations.

Our model has several important implications for theory on volunteer management. For one, we believe that it is important for novel theories on volunteering to go beyond the motives to volunteer. While these motives have captured the bulk of scholarly attention to date, it is equally important to understand how NPOs can elicit the required contributions from volunteers and retain them. To this end, we discussed the concept of issues of reliability in volunteer
management. This concept is theoretically important as it was conceptualized specifically with volunteers in mind. A common criticism in the volunteering literature is that scholars apply for-profit theories on paid employees to volunteers working in NPOs. These critics argue that scholars, as a result, fail to capture the unique nature of the volunteering context. The concept of issues of reliability in volunteer management, in contrast, is highly applicable to the volunteering context, given that volunteers have a high amount of freedom in deciding when and how to contribute to a NPO.

It is important to note that our model focuses exclusively on volunteers. However, many NPOs have a mixture of volunteers and paid staff. As both groups differ from each other in various ways, it is unsure if our model generalizes to paid staff. For example, studies have shown that volunteers have higher levels of affective and normative commitment than paid employees, and that they perceive a stronger fit between themselves and their organization (van Vuuren, de Jong, & Seydel, 2008). Likewise, it has been suggested that the content of volunteers’ psychological contract likely differs from that of paid employees, as they value incentives differently than paid employees (Farmer & Fedor, 1999; Vantilborgh et al., 2012). However, there is tentative evidence that there are also several similarities between both groups’ psychological contracts (Liao-Troth, 2001), especially in terms of processes related to psychological contract breach (Vantilborgh et al., 2016). Hence, we believe that the breach and balance processes described in our model likely apply to both volunteers and paid staff. Notwithstanding these similarities, we expect that there will be differences between both groups in terms of functional motives and the role of volunteering styles. Moreover, other differences between both groups may lead to different reactions to psychological contract breach and balance. For example, employees who perceive a lack of job alternatives may not react negatively to psychological contract breach, whereas a lack of job alternatives is irrelevant for volunteers’ reactions.
Finally, our model also asserts that insights from various fields—such as economics, management, sociology, or psychology—are relevant to understand issues of reliability in volunteer management, because they all pertain to the exchange agreement between volunteers and NPOs. However, the theories used in our model cannot be considered an exhaustive list of all theories relevant to this issue. Our model could be expanded by introducing other theoretical perspectives that have been used in the volunteering literature, such as self-determination theory (Bidee et al., 2013; Boezeman & Ellemers, 2009), volunteer role identity theory (Finkelstein, Penner, & Brannick, 2005), or personality theory (Elshaug & Metzer, 2001). For example, the individual factors in our model could be expanded by adding factors such as perceived role ambiguity (House & Rizzo, 1972) and the fit between the volunteer’s skills and competences and the job requirements (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Ambiguous roles and a lack of fit are likely to increase the chance to perceive psychological contract breach and, hence, trigger issues of reliability. The organizational factors in our model could be expanded by adding factors such as leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004) or the quality of the relationship between supervisors and volunteers (Griep, Vantilborgh, Baillien, & Pepermans, 2016). For example, supervisors who develop strong relationships with volunteers, and intellectually stimulate or inspire them may be able to prevent that perceptions of psychological contract breach translate into decreased reliability of volunteers. We would like to note that volunteers can also behave unreliable in the absence of psychological contract breach or imbalance. While our model positions psychological contracts as a key mechanism to explain issues of unreliability, other factors can also come into play. For example, conflict between volunteer tasks and family responsibilities could also explain why some volunteers behave unreliably, even when the NPO fulfills all its obligations.
6. Limitations and recommendations for future research

Future studies could empirically test the propositions of our theoretical model. First, it is important for future studies to correctly operationalize the issue of reliability in volunteer management. Ideally, this would be assessed from the NPO’s perspective; measured as the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the expected attendance and output of volunteers and, on the other hand, the actual attendance and output of volunteers. In a sense, such a conceptualization would align with a breach in the psychological contract of the NPO—because the volunteer is not living up to his or her promises—acknowledging that there are two parties in the exchange agreement (Tekleab & Taylor, 2003). A first challenge for future research is therefore testing if such a conceptualization is a valid measure for the concept of issues of reliability in volunteer management. Moreover, NPOs may not always be aware that a volunteer is behaving unreliably. Hence, in some cases there may be a discrepancy between reliable behavior and perceptions of reliability. While our model focused on the extent to which the volunteer behaves reliably, it may also be worthwhile to focus on the NPOs perceptions of volunteers’ reliability, because this perception may ultimately drive their interactions with the volunteers.

Second, research can focus on the content of the psychological contract of volunteers and relate this to functional motives, volunteering style, incentive packages, and NPO professionalization. Ideally, these studies would longitudinally assess the formation of the psychological contract in nascent volunteers. Taking the tenure of the volunteer and the stage of psychological contract formation into account may help to explain why some earlier studies failed to find clear relationships between, for example, functional motives and psychological contract content (Liao-Troth, 2005). Our model assumes that psychological contract content influences volunteer reliability, because it moderates the effects of psychological contract breach (i.e., volunteers react more strongly to breach of elements in their psychological contract
that are functionally relevant). While psychological contract breach is considered a key process through which the psychological contract influences outcomes (Rousseau, 1995), it could also be argued that the content of a psychological contract has a direct effect on volunteer reliability (e.g., volunteers with an ideological psychological contract may be more reliable than volunteers with a transactional psychological contract). This extension of our model requires empirical validation in future research.

Third, scholars could look into psychological contract breach moderators, such as the functional relevance of the broken obligation and the match between the broken obligation and the volunteering style. Studies have already demonstrated that not every paid employee responds similarly to perceptions of breach. However, few studies have explored such moderators in the context of volunteering (for an exception, see Griep et al., 2016). Our model suggests a number of potential moderators, unique to this context. Investigating these moderators appears crucial from a practitioner’s perspective, as they elucidate how organizations can intervene to prevent negative reactions to breach.

Fourth, our model was developed within a Western cultural context, and hence may not generalize to other cultural contexts. There is tentative evidence that reactions to psychological contract breach differ between cultures (Thomas et al., 2010). While we believe that the psychological contract processes in our model (i.e., breach and balance) are relevant across cultures, the strength of their effects may depend on cultural differences. For example, volunteers in collective societies may not behave unreliably in reaction to a perceived psychological contract breach, because they want to preserve harmony in the relationship. In addition, the meaning of volunteering and volunteering practices differ between cultures (Haivas, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2014). Theoretical extensions of our model, taking into account societal and cultural factors, and empirical validation in various cultural contexts is therefore warranted.
Finally, future research could examine the underlying dimensions of volunteer reliability. We defined issues of reliability as a behavioral construct, reflecting the extent to which a volunteer behaves in line with the contributions that are expected from him or her. However, research on related constructs such as organizational commitment often distinguishes a behavioral, affective, and cognitive component (Solinger, van Olffen, Roe, & Hofmans, 2013). These three components could also underlie issues of reliability. For example, volunteers may not feel like making the contributions that were once promised (i.e., affective component), yet still behave in line with their psychological contract and deliver these contributions (e.g., a volunteer does not feel like showing up on time, but still arrives in time for the task). Such a situation would resemble presenteeism in a paid employment context, where employees are present at work but not productive (Johns, 2010). Qualitative research could help to better understand all the underlying components of volunteer reliability.

7. Conclusion

We propose a novel theoretical model of volunteer management that focuses on explaining issues related to the reliability of volunteers in NPOs. Our model ascribes a central role to the psychological contract of volunteers; when a volunteer perceives that the organization is breaching certain obligations, he or she responds by lowering her or his own contributions, which in turn causes issues of reliability for volunteer managers. We outline, based on insights from psychology, sociology, economics, and management, a number of factors that shape the psychological contract of volunteers, the likelihood to perceive a breach by volunteers, and volunteers’ reactions to breach. We hope that our model helps to integrate theories and findings from various domains in the volunteering literature, and advances future research due to its unique fit to the volunteering context.
References


Figure 1. An integrative model of volunteer reliability

**The psychological contract**

- **Psychological contract breach by the NPO** (i.e., promised inducements - delivered inducements)
- **Psychological contract content**
  1. Specific inducements and contributions
  2. Psychological contract types
- **Psychological contract balance** (i.e., promise-based balance = promised inducements / promised contributions; fulfillment-based balance = delivered inducements / delivered contributions)
  - Balanced versus imbalanced psychological contracts

**Proposition 1**

**Proposition 2**

**Proposition 3(a)**

**Proposition 3(b)** & **Proposition 5**

**Proposition 4**

**Proposition 6(a)**

**Proposition 6(b)**

**Proposition 7**

**INDIVIDUAL VOLUNTEER CHARACTERISTICS**
- Functional motives

**ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS**
- Volunteer coordination practices

**Volunteer reliability** (i.e., the extent to which the volunteer delivers contributions that were promised to the organization—put differently, psychological contract breach by the volunteer)

**Volunteering styles**

**Nonprofit professionalization trends**

**SOCIOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS**