

The Satisfaction of Charity Work – Real or Imagined?

by Theodore Dalrymple

A lengthy paper in the [*Journal of Economic Psychology*](#) (54 (2016) 64 – 84), lyrically titled ‘“... Do it with joy!” – Subjective well-being outcomes of working in non-profit organisations’ – tries to demonstrate that British workers in the so-called third sector – that is to say, non-profit organisations – derive considerably more life satisfaction than those who work in the for-profit sector. The author, Dr Martin Binder, of Bard College in Berlin, concludes:

This paper has explored the impact of non-profit work on life satisfaction and found a significant and positive impact (the size about more than a fourth of that of getting widowed).

This is a rather peculiar statement, which does not tell us whether widowhood's effect is positive or negative. If positive, is it an implicit plea that disgruntled wives should be supplied with poison at public expense for the sake of their well-being?

The author compared the life satisfaction according to various self-report measures of well-being of 12,786 employees in private firms and 966 employees in non-profit organisations. He found the life satisfaction of the latter to be greater than that of the former, even though their salaries were, on average, lower.

In the discussion of the results, arrived at after a heroic amount of statistical calculation, he suggests that this may be because those in the non-profit sector feel that they are doing something socially useful. He admits that he has proved no causative relationship – it could be, for example, that

pre-existing differences in personality accounted for the superior contentment of the workers in the non-profit sector – but he does not favour this explanation. Of course, it is also possible that that there was no causative relation in either direction.

His results are consistent with the proposition that self-satisfaction is good for you. The workers in the non-profit sector derive satisfaction from the idea that they are doing something worthwhile, something good. There is no requirement in that feeling of satisfaction that they should actually be doing good. I have no doubt that workers for UNICEF felt very pleased with their work, bringing wells to the villages of Bangladesh, work that resulted in the largest mass poisoning (with arsenic) in history. Nor is it difficult to show that many large charities in Britain are charitable only in the legal and accounting sense, which is different from that of common usage. I asked the old ladies serving in a charity shop in my town what proportion of the money they took they thought went to the charity in whose name the shop was run.

‘Why, all of it,’ they replied, open-eyed as if I were mad.

In fact it was eight pence in the pound; and of that eight pence, about half would be used up in the salaries of the people working in the charity. But the old ladies were very happy working there (I did not disillusion them) because they imagined that they were doing something socially useful – other than for themselves, that is – and were helping the most impoverished people in the world.

Here, taken at random, is an extract from the job specification of a vacancy in a large charity:

We are looking for an experienced HR Business Partner with strong organisation and interpersonal skills to provide expert HR support and advice to the charity's employees, including regular communications with senior management. This

position requires you to have knowledge and provide advice on areas such as: performance, talent and change management, employee relations, pay and reward, absence management, and recruitment. Additionally, you will be an experienced people manager.

The role requires an individual with strong influencing skills, who can provide advice to senior managers, ensuring our people management strategy is a core part of the charity's overall business strategy.

Does anyone really communicate regularly with senior management or ensure that a people management strategy is a core part of an overall business strategy with joy, as the title of the paper suggests? Or is the satisfaction of working for non-profit organisations mere self-satisfaction, that of feeling good ex officio? On that question, the paper is silent.

First published in