

December 2001

*Visions of Charity: Volunteer Workers and Moral Community.*

Rebecca Anne Allahyari

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

**Recommended Citation**

(2001) "Visions of Charity: Volunteer Workers and Moral Community. Rebecca Anne Allahyari," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 28: Iss. 4, Article 20.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.2781>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol28/iss4/20>

This Book Note is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



robberies, drug robbers are often caught in situations where they must make quick decisions which ultimately might jeopardize the robbery and result in violence against themselves or others.

This book provides a window into a culture within a culture that few consider important enough to even mention. A major strength of this book is that it combines two theoretical approaches, namely, rational choice theory and phenomenological interactionism. Jacobs relies heavily on quotes to illustrate in finer detail the decision-making processes and the emotions of his subjects as they plan, stage, and eventually execute a drug robbery.

It would have been useful if Jacobs had spent a little more time considering the policy implications of his work. Clearly, drug dealing and drug robbery are intractable problems which have no easy solutions. However, Jacobs provides very little insight into what approaches should be tried to ameliorate the conditions under which these individuals live. In the last paragraph of Jacobs' book, reference is made to legalizing drugs as a possible strategy to "... wiping out their black-market value." (p. 145), but he admits that this is unlikely to occur in the near future given the entrenched drug culture that has emerged. It would have been important for Jacobs to consider other policy options, perhaps less extreme than legalization, that might provide some leverage with this problem. For example, harm reduction strategies that provide broader based interventions to reduce the harm from drug use may be one step in this direction. Despite this limitation, Jacobs has done an excellent job of reminding us that criminal behavior is a very relative term.

Rebecca Anne Allahyari, *Visions of Charity: Volunteer Workers and Moral Community*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000. \$45.00 hardcover, \$17.95 papercover.

With the recent announcement of President George W. Bush's faith based initiative in social policy, interest in the role of religious organizations in meeting social needs has intensified. Of course, religious organizations have long been involved in providing services to people in need. In addition to the efforts of local churches, synagogues and temples, large scale operations managed by the major denominations are now well

established. Catholic Charities, the Jewish Federations and the Salvation Army are just a few of these bodies. Unfortunately, their work has not been adequately researched. Although information about their mission, programs and expenses are available, much more research into their role in social welfare is needed.

Rebecca Allahyari's book makes an important contribution to understanding how faith based organizations function. Her book is concerned with the role of volunteers in two sectarian agencies catering to homeless people in Sacramento, California. One of these, Loaves and Fishes, is a Catholic organization which makes extensive use of volunteers in its daily feeding program. The other, the Salvation Army, also uses volunteers but most of its services are provided by staff who are former clients and by court ordered volunteers challenged by substance and related problems. Allahyari spent a good deal of time in both organizations as a volunteer herself gathering important ethnographic information on the activities of these organizations. More importantly, her analysis of their different approaches to the problem of homelessness provides helpful insights into the potential of faith based organizations to address social needs. Her account of the way the volunteers defined their role and formulated a moral image of themselves makes for fascinating reading.

Allahyari found that the two organizations differ substantively in the way they approach the problem of homelessness. Loaves and Fishes promoted a 'personalist hospitality' approach that gave expression to ideals of compassion and altruism within a loosely structured framework of service provision. On the other hand, the Salvation Army's program was much more structured and focused on rehabilitation through discipline, moral regeneration and work. Of course, these two approaches do not only characterize religious charity, but are a microcosm of dominant philosophies in social welfare in general.

Allahyari's account is wide ranging and while it focuses on the moral experience of being a volunteer, it also touches on issues of gender, race and community within the context of social service provision. A short final chapter relates the study to the wider issues attending the faith based approach. These include the question of the separation of religion and state, the politics of faith based provision and questions of funding. The book contains

much that will be of relevance as the debate about the proper role of the religious community in social welfare evolves.

Alan F. Zundel, *Declarations of Dependency: The Civic Republican Tradition in U. S. Poverty Policy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000. \$16.95 papercover.

Although much social policy scholarship was previously concerned with providing descriptive accounts of the way the social services function, more attention has been focused in recent years on the wider political, social and economic context in which social policies evolve. The role of ideology in social policy is one contextual factor which has been extensively debated but which still evokes simplistic interpretations.

In this interesting and readable account, Zundel shows how normative themes in social policy discourse today are rooted in a complex history of beliefs about social welfare. The author suggests that the notion of dependency, which is widely used in contemporary welfare debates is, in fact, central to the American founding. At the time, it was used to connote feudal patronage and reliance on the benevolence of the nobility. The colonial ethos not only rejected the feudal legacy but resulted in purposeful attempts to end it. One such attempt was the granting of small holding to settlers together with credit, supplies and equipment so that they could establish themselves as independent citizens. The state's role was not one of *laissez-faire* but of actively promoting self-sufficiency. Zundel terms this approach the 'Civic Republican Tradition' because it gave expression to the belief that a republican democracy would thrive if comprised of independent and self-sufficient property owners. This tradition, which continues to exert a powerful influence today, may be distinguished from other traditions in social policy thinking.

Examining the history of social welfare through from this perspective, the author shows how many social policy initiatives over the years have been influenced by the legacy of civic republicanism. The New Deal's emphasis on home ownership, which is deeply embedded and extensively subsidized by taxpayers today, is heavily influenced by this tradition as is the current emphasis on workfare. However, perhaps the most important example of the legacy of civic republicanism is the idea of matched savings