

STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL VOLUNTEERING

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Abstract: *Understanding the motivation behind getting involved in voluntary activities has been the topic of several studies conducted in countries with tradition in this field and not only. The purpose of this paper is to present some relevant aspects of volunteers' motivations and the advantages of volunteering as they are described in the scholarly literature. It also includes a good practice example, along with the results of a quality study carried out among volunteer students of the Faculty of Social-Humanistic Sciences of The University of Oradea. The results of the study confirm and complete the information found in scholarly literature. The subjects of the study stated that altruism, self-satisfaction and the need for involvement, as well as professional development, the experience acquired, the results of their work/the progress of the beneficiaries, are only some of the internal and external motives behind the decision of getting involved.*

Key words: *benefits, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, social involvement/responsibilisation, students, volunteering.*

1. Introduction

Volunteering is an important component for the development of any society. After 1990, the number of NGOs and of volunteers has increased in many countries, and a particular attention has been given to promoting volunteering in order to involve the citizens in the life of local communities and make them responsible, the young generation in particular.

In 2011, the European Year of Volunteering, a great number of events were organised to celebrate the activity of volunteers, as well as to reaffirm the role played by associations within the European Union. On this occasion, a study was conducted at European level to analyse relevant aspects of involvement in voluntary activities, in the areas of the continent where volunteering is popular, the European public opinion on volunteering, as well as the citizens' expectations of it. The results of the study backed up the fact that in countries with a long tradition of volunteering, such as the Low Countries, Denmark, Finland, Austria etc, involvement in voluntary activities takes place on a regular basis, while in countries such as Poland, Portugal, Bulgaria, Romania etc the scores are well below the average of the European Union. A relevant aspect of the study results is the one which shows that volunteering does not depend on gender or age, but it

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should be mentioned that it is more popular among educated people. Regarding the main field of interest, solidarity and humanitarian aid were placed on top. If we look at the benefits, according to the respondents, volunteering contributes to the personal development of volunteers, it facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed for professional inclusion, while also giving the opportunity to develop civic participation (TNS Opinion and Social, 2011).

The results of a study conducted in Romania in 2013 by the Centre of Marketing and Social Forecasting, at the request of React Association, showed that the highest percentage of the subjects included in the study who declared that they took part in voluntary activities was that of students – 29%. The same study also showed that the fields volunteers are most interested in are social services, those concerning the environment and education, while the desire to help others (40%) is one of the most important reasons behind their decision to get involved (CMPS, 2013).

As it can be seen from those presented above, in our country, even though we are among the countries that are placed below the average of the European Union regarding the involvement in voluntary activities, there are concerns in this respect, and changes can be brought about by the young generation. Having regard to the past of our country and to the fact that only after 1989 were the first true steps taken in this respect, it is of utmost importance to raise awareness about the importance of volunteering for local communities, about the benefits of volunteering, both for the volunteers themselves and for the communities, as well as about the potential of volunteering for increasing social responsibility.

On the basis of these ideas, this paper presents some aspects of volunteers' motivations and the advantages of volunteering as they are described in the scholarly literature. The practical part of the paper deals with an example of good practice and it also includes a qualitative study carried out among volunteer students of the Faculty of Social-Humanistic Sciences of The University of Oradea. The questions which have provided the basis for the study were: What makes the students to become volunteers? and What are, in their opinions, the advantages obtained as a result of involvement?

2. The Motivations behind the Decision to Become Volunteers and the Benefits of Volunteering

Volunteering is considered a noble activity, carried out of one's own free will, without constraints and without getting any payment. Volunteering is defined as being “regular unpaid work which benefits other people outside the immediate family or social circle” (Haefliger & Hug, 2009, p. 3).

The number of studies on volunteering has increased in recent years, and what can be seen in the scholarly literature is that several theoretical models have been proposed in an attempt to explain how this phenomenon has developed.

Volunteering is seen “as an important manifestation of human help”. In their study *Understanding and Assessing the Motivations of Volunteers: A Functional Approach*, Clary et. al highlight three relevant aspects, namely: volunteers often seek out opportunities to help others; they deliberate about whether to volunteer, their involvement and the degree to which certain activities fit with their personal needs; and they may make a commitment which may extend over long periods of time and which may involve costs of time, energy and opportunity (Clary et al., 1998, p. 1516).

Given these aspects, the following questions arise: What makes people to become volunteers, what makes them want to help?

The first models of the motivations behind voluntary involvement refer to intrinsic and extrinsic motives of our decisions. If we look at extrinsic motives, social norms may determine the decision of involvement to be taken. Regarding the intrinsic motives which determines people to get involved in voluntary activities, the following have been identified: the values that guide individuals, interests and the enjoyment activities bring about. In addition to its important role in fostering the development of civil society, of democracy and to being an evidence of people's kindness and commitment, volunteering has positive effects on volunteers themselves. Research results indicate a positive association between volunteering and the volunteers' health and well-being (Miljkovic, Rijavec & Jurcec, 2013).

One of the theories used in the study of motivation is the *self-determination theory*, which approaches human motivation and personality by using traditional empirical methods. In order to explain motivation and the state of well-being, the theory refers to basic psychological needs, and identifies three such needs: competence, relatedness and autonomy, which are essential for promoting optimal operation, for growth and integration, as well as for social development and personal well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

According to Petru Ștefăroi, volunteers in social work are characterised by traits such as altruism, sensitivity to the needs and suffering of people facing difficulties, desire for personal development, flexibility, creativity, tolerance and "even if there are very few cases of people involved in voluntary activities who might not have any personal goal behind the status of being a volunteer, their conduct should, nevertheless, serve mainly the true humanitarian goals of the organisation they work for" (Ștefăroi, 2013, p. 143).

A study which included 400 students from "Babeș-Bolyai" University and the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca showed that the students' entering the labour market is determined by economic, social and/or *idealistic* factors, the latter ones being intrinsic factors, "idealistic wishes", which characterise volunteers who want to do good in the world or to be useful to society (Tobias, 2014, p. 10).

The results of a comparative study carried out in five countries – Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Great Britain and the United States – shows that students do recognise a mix of motivations and benefits brought about by volunteering, but instrumental and career motivations, such as job/career experience, provides references for employment or college, leadership skills etc, are not statistically different from altruistic/value-driven motives, such as self-satisfaction, opportunity to learn new things, build trust among people in society, and social/ego-defensive factors (Cnann et al., 2010).

Another study, conducted in Great Britain, which had students as subjects and which focused on the motivations and experiences of volunteers, showed that students are motivated to take part in voluntary activities by labour market inclusion, and those students who are motivated by employment criteria are much more likely to seek for structured activities, in an organised environment. The subjects of the study also identified the way voluntary activity could be associated with building self-confidence, by interaction with others, but also by having to cope with new situations (Holdsworth, 2010).

A study conducted in Lithuania shows that volunteering as a form of non-formal self-development creates benefits not only for society, but for the volunteers as well, which in

the case of students are: development of professional skills, personal and social development, acquisition of new knowledge and competences which help the integration into the labour market (Repeckiene, Kvedaraite, Zvireliene, & Glinskiene, 2014).

A study carried out in Romania, with subjects students from the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University from Iaşi, and which had as one of its objectives assessing the variables that can explain the motivation for volunteering, shows that the highest percentage of the respondents involved in voluntary activities claim that they get involved in such kinds of activities in order to gain experience, followed by the desire to help (Netedu & Blaj, 2012).

As it can be seen, taking part in voluntary activities not only brings personal benefits for volunteers, such as professional development, social development and personal well-being, acquisition of new knowledge and competences needed for integration into the labour market, but also fosters the development of civil society at large.

3. An Example of Good Practice

In 2013, a group of students from the Social Work Department of the Faculty of Social-Humanistic Sciences of the University of Oradea, with the help of a teacher, founded the CHARIS Association. The young people who had the idea of establishing this association wanted to get involved in the life of the local community and contribute to solving the problems faced by disadvantaged groups. During their studies, practical placement and volunteering programmes the students identified the needs of several vulnerable groups, and through their association they prepared and implemented projects to address them. The first groups which benefited from support were those of children and youth living in placement at Placement Centre No. 2 Oradea. The projects focused primarily on personal development, on developing independent living skills, on discovering abilities and involving the children in artistic activities, on organising leisure time activities. Besides these interventions which benefited the identified target groups, a particular attention was given to promoting the idea of volunteering within the community.

Thus, in 2015, the idea of a project, called “Volunteering builds bridges for social cohesion”, took shape. The project was funded by the Ministry of Youth and Sport, through the Bihor County Directorate for Sport and Youth. Besides raising awareness among pupils and students about the value and importance of volunteering in the life of the local community and learning about the social problems existing within the community, the project also aimed at responsabilising them for active involvement.

As a result of the project, the team of voluntary students who got involved in its implementation was completed with 10 students from 5 high-schools from Oradea, who expressed their wish to take part in the implementation of future projects of the association.

The fact that year by year new volunteers join the initial nucleus of 2013 shows the interest of young people in these types of activities. Changes can be achieved only with the support of people willing to get involved, even though the steps are small.

In order to identify the motives behind the students involvement and the benefits they gain from taking part in these kinds of activities, as they perceive them, we carried out a qualitative study, which is presented below.

4. Methods

4.1. The Instrument

The method used in this research was the interview, and the data were collected by semi-structured individual interviews. The data collecting instrument, the interview guide used, was structured around three topics: *Forms and areas of volunteering*, *The motivation for being a volunteer* and *What did your involvement in the project "Volunteering builds bridges for social cohesion" mean to you*.

4.2. The Subjects

The subjects of the study were 12 students who were involved in the implementation of the project "Volunteering builds bridges for social cohesion".

Regarding their gender, age and background, the subjects belong to the following categories: one is male, the other 11 are females; their ages are between 19 and 23 years; three of them come from the countryside, the others from urban areas.

The subjects are students in years I, II and III from Social Work (10) and Psychology (2).

Regarding how long they have been involved in voluntary activities, that varies between 5 months and 8 years.

5. Results

In order to interpret the result, thematic analysis was used.

Forms and areas of volunteering, positive aspects and difficulties. The fields in which the subjects have been active as volunteers are the following: social, education, environment, art and healthcare. The host institutions listed by the students included secondary schools, high schools, faculties, associations and foundations active in the social and environment fields, state institutions from the social field (example: the Social Community Administration Oradea), the theatre. The categories of beneficiaries the students worked with are: disabled children and youth, children suffering from chronic diseases, children from disadvantaged backgrounds, older people, homeless people. The types of activities they were involved in as volunteers were diverse: campaigns to raise awareness among citizens about the problems faced by certain categories of the population, organising specific activities with various categories of beneficiaries – educational activities (tutoring) and recreational/leisure time activities with disabled children and youth (games), activities in hospitals (beneficiaries: children suffering from chronic diseases, older people), humanitarian activities (collecting food donations, distributing clothes, preparing and distributing hot meals), promoting theatre performances, environment protection activities etc.

According to the subjects, the positive aspects of their involvement in these activities are: acquisition of knowledge, expansion of their social area, spiritual satisfaction, personal development, spending free time in a useful way, the agreements they signed as volunteers, developing teamwork skills, developing communication skills, understanding the needs of others, discovering their own abilities and interests, the contacts with experts and the chance to learn from them.

Regarding the difficulties, the subjects mentioned the following ones: the attachment relationships that develop between volunteers and beneficiaries, which can be sometimes too strong and can lead to the beneficiaries' dependence on the volunteers, tiredness, situations that are hard to manage in the relationship with the beneficiaries, too much responsibility, lack of rigour in the way activities are organised within some host institutions, too much pressure on volunteers from their supervisors, some volunteers' lack of seriousness, failing to meet the deadlines of some projects.

The motivation for being a volunteer and personal and social benefits. Regarding the intrinsic motivation, the subjects of the study said that the main internal motives behind their involvement in voluntary activities are the following: *altruism, self-satisfaction/spiritual satisfaction and the need for involvement.* They stated that *the pleasure of getting involved, of offering their abilities to others, the fact that by their help they can make the others smile and the pleasure to work with people, the fact that they play a part in the change of the community they live in,* are all important aspects when the decision of being a volunteer is made. In addition, *the desire for personal development and channelling energies to help others* are also among the motives that make them to get actively involved.

The respondents also spoke about the importance of extrinsic motivation, of the external motivational factors. Professional development, the experience acquired, the fact that volunteering may be considered as work experience, the contracts they sign as volunteers, the possibility to meet people with similar interests, to build contacts with other volunteers, the results of their work/the progress of the beneficiaries, the feedback received from the beneficiaries of the programmes, the image of the volunteer within the community, the shortage of staff in many institutions, are only some of the aspects behind the decision of getting involved.

From the personal benefits of voluntary activities, the subjects mentioned the following ones: professional and personal development, work satisfaction, skills acquired, personal image, the relationships with the others.

As social benefits of volunteering, the students included in the study spoke about: the collaborative relationships between the volunteers and the experts of various institutions in the community and between various institutions, changes in mentalities, the beneficiaries' self-confidence/self-esteem increases as a result of the services provided by volunteers and experts, and due to that they become more aware of the problems they face and capable to solve them.

The benefits of being involved in the project "Volunteering builds bridges for social cohesion". To the question "What have you learnt from this experience?", the answers of the subjects revolved around the idea of team. They emphasized the importance of taking part in team building activities so that its members get to know each other better and also understand better the value each member can bring for success.

"I learnt that a united team can be built in two days and that each member has outstanding qualities, which, along with those of the others, can make a whole".

"I have learnt from this experience that no matter how different we are, we can still work well together and that we should not get discouraged if things do not happen exactly as we wanted".

On a personal level, this project helped the students *to open new horizons, to know new people, to make friends, to relate to others, to better define for themselves their own ideas on how they want to contribute to social development, to understand that any idea can be*

used, to better understand the concept of volunteering. It was surprising to see that more subjects mentioned that they noticed the desire of youth to get involved and one of them even said “*I regained my trust in high school students*”.

The question “How do you intend to put into practice what you have learnt within the project?”, proved to be a challenge for the students. The answers referred to the involvement of the new team in the preparation and implementation of new projects, participation in future voluntary activities, but also to the promotion of volunteering in the local community.

5. Conclusions

The good practice example described above shows the students' interest in social volunteering, the importance of projects which offer young people, and not only, the opportunity to get involved, as well as an appropriate framework.

The results of the qualitative study confirm and complete the information found in the scholarly literature on the motivations of becoming a volunteer and the benefits of volunteering. The respondents perceive volunteering as a way of acquiring knowledge and self-knowledge, a way of learning by practical action, which develops a series of instrumental, communication and relational abilities and competences. The subjects' answers highlighted, on the one hand, the role of volunteering in acquiring the experience required on the labour market and for personal development and, on the other hand, they revealed the internal individual incentives that are behind the students' involvement in volunteering (self-satisfaction, spiritual satisfaction, the need/pleasure to help).

The benefits of volunteering are not only personal, but also social, as they foster the development of civil society at large. Consequently, the organisations “openness” to receiving volunteers, the promotion of volunteering and the receptivity of youth to such experiences are important for the development of volunteering in the social field.

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