

Hajnalka Fényes: What effects Volunteering?

Paul Dekker, Loek Halman (ed.): The Values of Volunteering. Cross-Cultural Perspectives. Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York, Boston, Dordrecht, London, Moscow, 2003

Although volunteering is an age-old social phenomenon, its theoretical issues and empirical research has been gaining ground currently, and it applies to the post-socialist countries as well. This is why the English language book consisting of eleven challenging Chapters by various authors is worth considering. The volume to be reviewed focuses on theoretical issues of volunteering such as its definition, motivations, micro- and macro-level determinants, and especially the relationship between volunteering and values. In the empirical Chapters mostly the data related to several countries and cultures are processed by means of quantitative, e.g. multi-variable methods.

Definitions and the new type of volunteering

The definition of volunteering is raised in several studies of the book. Highlighting the common elements volunteering can be described as a non-obligatory activity, it is carried out for the benefit of others (individuals, or specific organizations or society as a whole), it is unpaid and normally it takes place in an organized context. According to another analysis (Chapter 9) the definition of volunteering is more restricted, it takes place in formal, organized context, its motivation is not altruistic, its not like a commodity, it is carried out for the benefit of others or society as a whole, it is voluntary and unpaid. In contrast with the definitions used in everyday language some authors (Chapter 2 and 9) emphasize that volunteering is not purely altruistic activity as it can be beneficial for the individual. According to Chapter 2 defining volunteering i.e. what actually can be regarded volunteering is highly dependent on the net costs (the costs of volunteering and minus its benefit). The more voluntary an activity is regarded the more the costs of volunteering surpass the benefit produced by it. However according to data countries also differ with regard to what people see as volunteering, which may be due to the diversity in cultures and traditions.

In Chapter 10 the new type of volunteering is described. This type of volunteering is more specialized, less ideological; it demands less from their members than the movements that previously dominated the sector. The traditional volunteering based on values are less appealing, whereas the increase in cultural or leisure oriented volunteering, sports associations, organizations helping disabled, neighbourhood associations can be seen. More and more local organizations are becoming independent from national or regional levels of the organizations. The new pattern of volunteering offers challenging and meaningful activities, activity-oriented, the engagement is for short term and the turnover in the organizations is rather high. These developments are linked to a general process of individualization, which however cannot be totally identified with egoism. Chapter 7 shows that nowadays the service-oriented attitude is emerging, which creates a climate of trust and results in a more satisfactory and productive relationship between volunteer and recipient, in contrast with the earlier “merely” helping attitude, where reciprocity not necessarily was prevalent.

Micro- and macro determinants of volunteering

Micro- and macro level determinants of volunteering are also investigated in most of the studies. In Chapter 9 the authors have examined the individual determinants of volunteering in Romania such as gender, education, income, social network, religiosity, the size of the settlement, value system and age. Regarding individuals the role of resources such as material, cultural and social capital seems to be essential, especially the role of social network has been emphasized. In Chapter 3 the impact of social capital is examined in detail. The theoretical predictions have been confirmed by the results to a large extent, namely active engagement in religious institutions, membership in

voluntary organization, an extended social network (family and friends) and political activity are closely related to volunteering in most countries. However, contrary to expectations the relationship between political activity and volunteering was rather mild.

Theories on the motivations of volunteering can be ranked among the micro-level theories of volunteering, as well. Chapter 1 shows that among the effect of values, altruism, solidarity, reciprocity, equity, being helpful, and their relatedness to equality and inequality effect volunteering to a large extent. But volunteering has been widely influenced by the wide-spread role of individualism and it was due to this fact that new patterns of volunteering have emerged, whose motivation is mostly rational, but not necessarily egoistic. Values also have an influence on volunteering at the level of society as a whole and in turn volunteering has an impact on the values of society, e.g it can reinforce democracy. According to the conclusions of the book volunteering is an important component of civil society, but despite public belief it is not necessarily its essential element.

Among macro-level approaches in Chapter 4 the impact of cultural change, (the shift from industrial society to post-industrial society) on volunteering is examined by Ronald Inglehart, and Chapter 5 focuses on the organizational roots of volunteering and its macro-structural determinants. According to “social origin theory” volunteering is rather related to major social and organization patterns and institutions, it is more wide-spread in countries with a more developed non-profit sector.

In Chapter 11 is the relationship between volunteering and democratic attitudes is investigated, as well. The general conclusion from the analyses is that volunteering and democracy are not necessarily mutually connected either at individual or national level. Volunteers rated somewhat higher on the democratic attitude scale compared to non-volunteers, even after controlling the effect of variables, such as age, gender and the level of education, but the impact is rather low, much lower than the effect of the level of education on volunteering. The relationship between the rate of volunteering and democratic attitudes seemed to be weak at national level as well. However democracy measured in years and the situation of human rights had strongly affected the frequency of volunteering in a particular country.

In Chapter 12 the result of an ethnographic study in the United States is shown. The author participated in two kinds of voluntary organizations and according to her observations serious doubts arise about the widely accepted idea that volunteering involvement in voluntary associations broadens citizens' horizons and strengthen their involvement in politics. Volunteers and their leaders described in this Chapter often avoid political discussions in public and rather focus on the tasks to be done. Political discussions may occur in other small groups or at home. Thus the conclusion of the analysis is that voluntary activities seem to be not very conducive to the development of communities and volunteering to a large extent has turned into an individual activity.

Comparative Analysis of Cross -National Variations

In Chapter 3 and 5 the rate of volunteering and the types of volunteering of various countries is compared. At the top of the list the Northern-European countries and Great Britain, whereas at the bottom of the list the Eastern-European countries and Latin-American countries can be found. But in most of the advanced democracies, the rate of volunteering is above the average. The voluntary activities take place especially in social services, culture and recreation. In Chapter 11, contrary to Robert Putnam's results in the USA, age is not a factor that makes a difference in the level of volunteering. In several countries the rate of volunteering increased even if to a small degree both among the young and the old.

The collapse of communism and the rise of democracy have had effects on volunteering in Central-Eastern Europe. The results in Chapter 8 show the decline of forced, even compulsory volunteering in former communist organizations and the rise of the voluntarism in new organizations based on people's own free will. However this rise was uneven. After the transition years the establishment of civil society contributed to a rapid increase in volunteering, but after the slow-down of the changes and the rate of volunteering actually decreased. At the turn of the millennium the rate of volunteering was rather low compared to that of countries in Western-Europe.

In Chapter 9 the authors focus on Romania, where the rate of volunteering is relatively low as well. This may be due to a high degree of state control and besides Romania appears to be as a country where individual initiatives are not strongly encouraged and supported. Their results show that in Romania it is the legacy of communism (a high degree of state control, and forced volunteering), the traditional agrarian economy before 1945 (volunteering is more established in urbanized areas), the small amount of voluntary organizations, the high levels of poverty and the low level of education, the overwhelmingly strong ties in social networks, the fact that majority of the population belonging to the Orthodox church (the rate of volunteering is higher in Protestant countries) that mainly have had effect on volunteering. All in all the conclusion of the authors is that the lack of individual resources (the three types of capital) and the contextual (group-level) effects may explain why the rate volunteering is so low in Romania.

Evaluation

The strong point of the volume is that it covers a wide range of research results related to volunteering in various cultures and countries (including the comparative analysis of 8-24 countries in terms of the rate and patterns of volunteering in Europe, post-communist countries, Romania, Norway, Canada, USA and Mexico), a wide international spectrum of topics and issues is well-presented. But the results of the various studies in many cases cannot be compared as different research questions have been examined in various countries by means of different methods and the quality of the studies is sometimes uneven.

Although the volume is concerned with the theoretical issues of volunteering, its approach is rather empirical. But this empirical approach is the main assets of the volume, as well due to the high level empirical processing of the data. Multi-variable methods have also been used (but we have to mention that in Chapter 6 some minor methodological errors can be found), besides the outcomes of qualitative studies, such as ethnographic interviews and participants' observations are also presented. The aim that both theoretical and empirical issues are covered in the volume is highly appreciated, although less emphasis is laid on theoretical implications.

A specific point of interest of the volume, that volunteering is seen in terms of the impact of values and not in terms of the economic outcomes of volunteering, or in terms of the level of non-profit sector, although some of these issues are also dealt with in the studies. It is also very positive that it is not only volunteering in an organized context that is investigated and volunteering is not attached to merely the non-profit sector.

Finally regarding both theoretical and methodological aspects the studies are of high level and they highlight the relevance of the sociological research of the topic and some of its neglected aspects.