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On Social Circumstances Of Volunteering And Older Volunteers (Part 1)

Summary: The author deals with the conceptualisation of volunteering, less from the point of view of active citizenship than from the point of view of social circumstances stimulating or hindering volunteering. The author argues that volunteering is characterised mostly by its leisure time nature and therefore can not be conceptualised as non- paid work. Occasionally, volunteering can turn into a *leisure time professional career*. Conceptualising volunteering as non- paid work is not welcome. Any type volunteering comprises two motives which appear in pair: altruism and one's own interest. Volunteers volunteer for a number of reasons and a volunteering organisation has to identify these reasons and harmonize them with its own reasons and needs. Volunteers can be managed from the point of view of the fields of activity of an organisation or from the point of view of the volunteers' motives and competencies.

Key words: volunteering, leisure time, society, altruism, non- paid work, motives, leisure time career, voluntary organisation, serious volunteering, accidental volunteering, project volunteering.

Introduction

Volunteering has a double impact both on individuals and society/community. Volunteering offers possibilities for extensive non-formal learning and education, learning out of school, developing learnability and the developing of various competencies. Volunteering is definitely a social activity and what is social has to be explained from the social point of view, through the impact of social, economic, political, historic and/or cultural circumstances. There are several types of volunteering and several types of volunteers.

Social, historic, cultural and other circumstances of volunteering

In politics, economy and sciences *learnability* is considered as an important quality, important for shaping the globalizing world, as well as cultural, instrumental and technical competencies of individuals and community. Nevertheless, formal education and learning cannot suffice! Learning processes outside school are needed. Thus, volunteering taking place outside schools, can be a lifelong activity and therefore a place of extensive learning.

Volunteering is particularly appreciated and extended in the times of important and numerous social changes, social inequality and decreasing social fairness. War is always a big social interruption, therefore in war times and in the times of reconstruction there is a lot of *individual and organised volunteering*. The same holds good for economic crises. Thus numerous *study circles* took place in Sweden in 1902 in the times of economic crises when workers wanted to learn taking their destiny in their hands. *Community education* was started in the USA as a result of unemployment of young

people. In the 19th century in the times when national states were shaped there was a lot of volunteering too. To illustrate this point, in Slovenia saving houses were established, societies, cooperatives, libraries.

Organised volunteering has an important impact on volunteers and it changes social circumstances. But volunteering is mostly considered as a mere possibility to make a gift of oneself, one's culture, knowledge, time or money. Therefore, volunteering has been exclusively connected with leisure time and volunteers were expected to be people with good heart and people of good will. But in today's society volunteering is having ever more characteristics of *work*. It is getting closer to work and volunteers are expected to have ever more competencies. Therefore volunteering requires ever more *education* and *training*.

Jeremy Rifkin (1995) and others argue that the industrialised countries have just entered *the times of early informatics* and during the transition from industrial to information times many social changes occurred; unemployment, decrease of the public and increase of the civil sector bringing about a greater individual and collective dependency on volunteers which is typical of the civil sector. Volunteering is becoming a central social activity, therefore volunteering has to be considered in the same way as other important social activities. It requires education, guidance, research (conceptualisation and theoretical theses), shaping of *new voluntary roles* more in tune with the present times. But it should be emphasised that volunteering exists only where social ties are present, where relationships, nontangible capital, and social capital exist.

Social capital, the power of relationships and volunteering

Social capital can be considered as a resource enabling actors to attain aims but it is also a productive investment into social relationships.

Currently sociologists and other professionals widely use the term *social capital* though for a long time it was burdened with economic connotations. But social capital is nothing really new. It is like old wine in a new bottle. (Field, 2008). The central thesis of social capital can be summarised: relationships matters. Because we interconnect and work together for a longer time, we can achieve a lot. We can achieve what we could not achieve individually. Therefore we form societies and networks, we get connected with those with whom we share values. In the end, the networks themselves become a resource and can be looked upon as a kind of capital.¹ These networks are valuable in the immediate but also in other contexts. The more people with whom we share values we know, the richer is our social capital. (Field, 2008)

Philosophers have always been interested in social relationships. Thus Alexander de Tocqueville (2013) got enthusiastic over rich social life of American people. He reported that relationships, associations etc. function as

a kind of *social glue*. For French people culture has been, until recently, social glue. In both cases relationships are at stake.

Emile Dürkheim (1997), the father of French sociology was also interested in *relationships*. People can relate to other people *mechanically* because they live within structures, but in the 19th century was started *organic solidarity*. Relationships were established also with newcomers unknown people. Coleman argued that *social and economic capital are connected and complementary*. (Coleman in Field 2008). For understanding modern volunteering this argument is important.

Robert D. Putman, has contributed to shaping the concept of social capital calling it the kind of *social organisation* involving trust, norms and networks that can better social efficacy. (Putman v Field, 2008).

Social capital changes life, betters it or makes it worse. Contemporary institutions follow rules, they are less able to individuals' worries and concerns. When a decision has to be taken, we rely on those whom we know and trust, who we are close with.

Groups, associations, social networks enable us to give and to receive. Therefore an important role of volunteering is about establishing *social networks* which in their turn shape individual and social identity, build relationships and where information, emotional and material support can be found.

Volunteering, groups of volunteers, common values create circumstances, expectations, common aims, common norms as well as circumstances for co-operation and reciprocity. (Field. 2008, p- 70). Volunteering most of the times offers a model to be followed and is an image of positive social roles. If social networks are strong they can create contact, where volunteers can gain social status and self esteem.

To be continued