Community Volunteering: Motives and Conditions for Social Engagement

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Abstract

Volunteering as unpaid assistance to an individual or a group of people has great importance for the development of civil society and social welfare. The purpose of this study is to investigate the motives and conditions for social engagement in community volunteering using one of the regions in Russia as an example. In Spring 2019, 25 narrative interviews with volunteers were conducted. The study discovered the complementarity of moral and rational aspects of volunteering activities, as well as the complementarity of formal and informal volunteering practices that strengthen the capacity of the social welfare sector in the local community. Understanding the wide spectrum of volunteers’ motives, not just altruistic but also pragmatic, has practical importance for the development of community volunteering not only in the local but also in the global context.

Keywords: formal volunteering, informal volunteering, community volunteering, motive, qualitative research.

1. Introduction

Community volunteering involves various areas of support for those who found themselves in a position of financial, social or other vulnerability in a local community. Such support is especially necessary when government resources are limited, and it is not possible to provide help to everyone who needs in full (elderly people, people with disabilities, low-income citizens, and so on.) The principle of subsidiarity as the “idea that matters should be handled by the lowest, or closest possible level to where they will have their effect” (Colombo, 2008: 182), which volunteering movement adheres to, has great importance for the development of civil society and social welfare.

There is “formal” volunteering (that is, to an organization) and “informal” volunteering (that is, volunteering carried out individually outside of an organizational context) (Lee & Brudney, 2012). Volunteering as a tool to promote self-realization of an individual and volunteers’ motives have been the subject of investigation for researchers from different countries (Forbes & Zampelli, 2014; Milbourn, Black & Buchanan, 2019; Mousa & Freeland-Graves, 2017; Pavlova & Silbereisen, 2014; Russell, Nyame-Mensah, de Wit & Handy, 2019). People with disabilities present particular interest, as they can be both volunteers (Han, Brown & Richardson, 2019; Shandra, 2017; Yanay-Ventura, 2018) and recipients of assistance (Pryce, Hall & Gooberman-Hill, 2015). In the context of community volunteering, the following issues are being explored: social engagement in environment protection (Domroese, 2017; Zelenika, Moreau & Zhao, 2018), disaster management (Ludwig, Kotthaus, Reuter, van Dongen, & Pipek, 2017), health

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and social charities (Darley, 2018), volunteer recruitment (Piatak, Dietz & McKeever, 2019), and others.

High potential for development of volunteering movement in Russia is complemented by insufficient engagement of individuals in various forms of volunteering activities. In 2017, the share of volunteers among Russian citizens equaled to 5%, when at the same time on average about 22–23% of citizens of the European Union participated in volunteering activities. At the same time, the low percentage of volunteers in Russia can be attributed to the difficulties with statistical recording of informal activities for those individuals who are not involved in specific projects (Report on the State of Civil Society in Russian Federation, 2017: 50).

The purpose of this study is to identify the motives and conditions for social engagement in formal and informal community volunteering using one of the regions in Russia (Novosibirsk region) as an example. Understanding the wide spectrum of volunteers’ motives, as well as the institutional environment, has practical importance for the development of community volunteering not only in the local (regional) but also in the global context.

2. Volunteering: Relationship between individual and society in post-modern world

This research uses post-modernity theories to examine community volunteers’ motives and conditions for social engagement.

One of the characteristics of individualization in post-modern society is both strengthening of rational activities of individuals, and forming of social morals based on responsibility for others and solidarity with others who are in difficult life situations (Bauman, 2001). As Bauman notes (2001), there is nothing “rational” in taking on the responsibility to take care of others and to be a moral person in general.

According to Norbert Elias (1991), in post-modern society, human beings form a web of interdependences, which connects them. This web is called a figuration, which is a structure of mutually oriented and interdependent persons, who use it to meet their needs, solve problems, and seek answers.

The relationship between the individual and society becomes more complex in the postmodern world. One the one hand, through the figuration, individuals feel connected to the society, though this connection is not eternal and unbreakable. On the other hand, figurations give an opportunity to each person to express their individuality: actions of one individual intertwine with the actions of others, and their collective actions have a common vector.

Community volunteering can be viewed as a figuration that is formed by interdependencies between persons, thus allowing “helpers” to express their individuality, and it has a common goal in the local community.

3. Method

Research hypotheses:

(1) We suppose that informal community volunteering is of ad hoc nature, it is built into people’s everyday lives, and it helps them meet their individual needs.

(2) We assume that engagement in formal community volunteering has not only altruistic, but also pragmatic motives.
Research participants were recruited using convenience sampling. To search for potential informants, that is, informal community volunteers, requests for participation were placed in social networks VK.com and Instagram (https://vk.com/wall59267561_9525, https://vk.com/wall59267561_9583). Additionally, snowball sampling was used, when at the end of the interview, the informant was asked to recommend other potential participants.

To recruit formal community volunteers, the researchers used the social network of the second author, who is involved in community volunteering since 2012. The resource center for volunteer support in Novosibirsk region was used as a liaison during the search of informants through the official inquiry to volunteering organizations. At the same time, private messages were sent to regional volunteering organizations using their group pages in social network VK.com (https://vk.com/starikam_novosib, https://vk.com/suncityliferu, https://vk.com/dobrospasnks, https://vk.com/lizaalert_novosib).

In Spring 2019, 25 interviews with volunteers were conducted resulting in 7 male and 18 female participants between the ages of 18 to 52-years-old. At the time of survey, the informants lived in Novosibirsk. The body of informants included groups of people with various levels of engagement in community volunteering.

Table 1. Informant distribution based on level of engagement in volunteering activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Number</th>
<th>Type of Volunteering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>Informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-21</td>
<td>Formal, volunteering to an organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Formal, head of a foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23, 25</td>
<td>Formal, head of a search-and-rescue unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Formal, project coordinator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Narrative interview was used as a data collection instrument in this study since “a person lives his or her life as a story to be told” (Bauman, 2001). The main part of the interview contained the informants' narrative about life as a sequence of events from the moment they first helped complete strangers to the present time. During the conversations, the interviewers asked some follow-up questions to elicit commentary on the episodes in which the informant participated in informal or formal community volunteering. These questions helped clarify the meaning intended by particular comments of informants.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve the validity of the data. The names of the participants were removed to protect anonymity, and a number was assigned to each interview (e.g., P1 stands for “Participant 1”).

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, in accordance with the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). All researchers were involved in data analysis to ensure consistency, transparency, and triangulation of findings. Combining interpretations of results attained by co-authors helped to avoid researcher bias.
4. Results and discussion

4.1 Formal and informal volunteering: Alternate or complementary forms of social engagement?

Despite splitting the informants into groups based on their level of engagement in community volunteering, almost all informants had experience helping strangers in everyday life. At a glance, in the minds of the informants, formal and informal volunteering represent alternate ways of supporting people in need in the local community. As one interviewee related, 

*You can join an organization, take part in more targeted and large-scale activities, rather than help one [person] in need… Some people like it more, some like it less. (P2)*

However, for the local community, complementarity of various forms of community volunteering has great importance, and for the potential participants, it is important to be able to select such forms of support to those in need that fit into their lives “here and now.” The interrelationship between formal and informal volunteering is evidenced by the fact that the majority of informants, who were at the time of the interview engaged in volunteering to organizations, had past experience helping people in everyday life. At the same time, participation in formal volunteering made them more attentive and sensitive to difficult personal situations of local community members. One participant summarized it as follows:

*Once I started working for an organization, I began to pay more attention to whether [people around me] needed help… [before] it was only occasional and only when I was being asked. (P12)*

Despite the difficulties with statistical reporting of volunteering activities in Russia, informal volunteering happens on a larger scale in the local community. Regardless of the age and social status, it fits into peoples’ daily routine more easily; support is provided “by reflex” and unconsciously, as a way of life. At the same time, some informants do not regard their actions, that is, helping those in need, as volunteering. According to one of the participants,

*I can’t remember the first time I helped someone, because I just didn’t consider it help… in fact, I never pay attention to this. (P10)*

Experience in informal volunteering forms the skills necessary for participation in formal volunteering, which requires psychological maturity, resiliency, self-discipline, ability to adapt to the team and to build the activities defined by the organization’s goals into their daily routine, and so on. Some informants who realize that they are not ready to participate in the activities of the organizations “here and now” due to lack of time, life experience, or emotional stability plan to participate in these activities in the future. As one interviewee explained,

*It’s fairly hard for me. Probably, I will just become more mature, and then I will really go to these [organizations], but so far, my busy schedule and lack of maturity in this issue get in the way. (P4)*

In the local community, volunteering – both formal and informal – performs an important function in a situation when governmental and regional services are not capable of helping everyone who needs it in full. As Bauman (2001) notes, constant uncertainty in postmodern society has deprived social welfare work of its soul: completing the activities by the book is more important than understanding the real reasons why the person has contacted the social services. Volunteering organizations start filling this gap. Engagement in regular volunteering activities happens if a person cares about a certain issue and is ready to spend a part of his or her life, time, and effort on it. At the same time, the selection of formal or informal volunteering takes place depending on existing capacity. If there is internal potential then the person becomes an organizer and finds resources and like-minded people to implement his or her idea. If there is not enough capacity, the volunteer joins already existing initiatives, projects, and
organizations. Both types of engagement contribute to the development of volunteering movement.

4.2 Informal volunteering: Unconscious social engagement vs. rational choice

Providing assistance outside the volunteering organization often has ad hoc and spontaneous character, and it fits into people’s daily routine. The majority of informants believe that they help others out of habit, without thinking how much time, energy, or emotions they are spending. Parents’ behavior patterns, internalized in the process of socialization, are unconsciously reproduced in everyday life. Interviewees commented that

*My father was always a role model for me. He was a very kind person, and, as I thought when I was a kid, he never refused to help anyone... First, I offered all these types of support because I wanted to act like my dad. And then... it became a second nature to me... and [I was doing it] just out of habit.* (P2)

*and*

*My family is like that... my parents have always been very kind, they always try to help everyone and sometimes even at their own expense, I have seen it from my childhood.* (P19)

This observation aligns with the research by Van Goethem et al. (2014), who found that parents’ experience with volunteering increased the probability of their children’s engagement in volunteering activities.

Readiness to provide support to strangers in need is not only the result of upbringing, but also a consequence of rational thinking and understanding of the necessity of a “social contract.” By supporting the atmosphere of mutual support, responsiveness, and sensitivity towards others, by taking on the responsibility for social well-being in the local community, the volunteers form an environment in which they will receive help themselves if necessary. The theme of the “social contract” in minds of some of the informants acquires the shape of a mythological plot related to the “boomerang effect.” As one interviewee explained,

*You help someone, then someone helps you... We need to somehow keep such practice and such a norm that you can’t act differently.* (P7)

In informal volunteering, human behavior can be regulated with public opinion that reflects moral values. Providing assistance in a public space results in moral approval, when at the same time, inaction may lead to such consequences as moral disapproval and condemnation. Regardless of “soft pressure” of the public opinion, an individual makes a rational choice whether to help or not. In this case, social engagement helps avoid the feelings of guilt, shame, and remorse. As one participant said,

*There were situations... when I was feeling sorry for someone, but I walked past it, and then was feeling bad because of that, was feeling bad that I walked past it, and I was feeling sad.* (P5)

Besides the internalized patterns of behavior due to upbringing and/or making a rational choice of following the “social contract”, volunteers’ motives are often related to achieving personal goals and meeting individual needs. Based on the thematic analysis, two main groups of informal volunteers’ motives have emerged:

1) Pursuit of self-development, increasing self-esteem. When a person takes on responsibility and helps others, he or she gets satisfaction from “overcoming oneself.” Besides, it gives an opportunity to take initiative based on internal motivation and their own desires. Interviewees commented that
If there are many people around, then everyone thinks that someone else will help, and as a result, no one helps... And I just decided that this time I won’t be standing on the sidelines... Once you’ve done it, you have this good feeling inside that you have overcome... a mental trap. (P8)

and

If I happened to be there at that moment, it was meant to be... to shift it to someone else and think that someone else will do it – it's silly, because I know perfectly well that sometimes you only have seconds, minutes to do something. (P13)

(2) Receiving emotional feedback: feeling of satisfaction, happiness, pleasant emotions, elevated mood, and recipients’ gratitude. Positive feedback motivates to provide assistance in the future, though the immersion in difficult life situations of strangers suggests stepping out of the comfort zone. Negative reaction to help on the part of some recipients also has positive impact, as it develops resiliency, tolerance, and emotional maturity in volunteers. Interviewees commented that

Gratitude is important to me, and it is important for me to hear a ‘thank you’ in return. It’s like a personal need I want to be recognized for my help. (P5)

and

When you are helping someone who can’t give you anything back, but he pays you back with a smile, with some positive energy... some energy exchange is what really happens. (P18)

One of the volunteers’ motives is the idea of pure altruism: the only reason for their behavior is a simple desire to help people who found themselves in a difficult situation. As one participant related,

Simply... I am trying to make the world a better place... this is my super-large mission in life... my task is to help others. (P1)

Thus, engagement in informal volunteering, firstly, is conducive to expressing one’s individuality and meeting important needs; secondly, in the local community, it maintains public morality that is based on mutual responsibility; thirdly, it forms the “canvas” of invisible connections between oriented towards each other and interdependent people who are united by the purpose of supporting and helping those in need.

Expressing the individuality for informal volunteers, who are acting in accordance with their own interests and at the same time are helping others, has great importance for the development of the potential social basis for formal volunteering, as it prepares these people for engagement in large-scale organization-led projects.

4.3 Formal volunteering: Motives and conditions of engagement

The spectrum of formal volunteers’ motives widens due to the emergence of volunteering organizations as a liaison between the “helper” and the “recipient”. The results of the thematic analysis revealed the following additional formal volunteers’ motives.

(1) Accumulation of social capital. Engagement in organization’s projects helps find a “brotherhood” of like-minded people. Depending on their interests, participants may establish interpersonal relationships and develop social networks within the organization and beyond. One of the research participants summarized this as follows:

It’s nice to realize that you are... in a company of people who are on the same page with you, and this is what is really missing in our lives right
now... There are many people like that, they are uniting... and they get together and socialize outside [of the organization]. (P13)

(2) New practical skills. The majority of organizations conduct volunteer training to practice the skills necessary for working with different categories of people (children, adolescents, people with disabilities, and elderly people), for searching for missing people in urban areas, in the woods, and so on. Along with other reasons for social engagement, volunteers mention obtaining new skills that are useful in everyday life; administrators of volunteering activities, projects, and organizations see it as an opportunity to enhance their career. As one interviewee said,

As in any organization, you grow... raise the level of your knowledge, understanding, competencies... We are self-taught, there are people who have more knowledge and competencies, they pass this knowledge on to those who just joined. (P25)

(3) Shifting attention, stress relief, psychological and physical offloading. In this case, volunteering replaces routine day-to-day activities carried out in the context of accelerated pace of life, rapidly changing technologies, and increasing individualization and autonomy. Interviewees commented that

Switching activities helps offload psychologically from the day-to-day worrying, day-to-day stress, and [offload] physically too... it fits into my life seamlessly... into that need for offloading and switching activities that I was missing. (P12)

and

Work, home... domestic issues... crazy pace you need to keep... [through volunteering,] I can say I am resting... At that moment, I am balanced, I feel good. (P14)

(4) Fulfilment of ambitions, feeling a part of the whole, sense of being needed. Engagement in organization’s activities helps scale up the practices of helping people in need; it is an opportunity to respond to a new challenge and to try oneself in new types of activities, and to realize the usefulness of these activities within the local community and beyond. According to one of the participants,

Here there is a certain element of self-actualization... to feel needed... I simply always wanted to be a volunteer. (P16)

Despite the rational decision of volunteers to get involved in the activities of an organization, their motives can be unconscious or more complex than they assume. One of the research participants, who is the head of an organization, summarized it as follows:

Sometimes a person doesn't fully understand his reasons, he might be saying one thing, but feel something completely different at heart. (P22)

According to one of the formal volunteering leaders, all participants can be divided into two groups.

(1) Volunteers who join the organization “out of the negative”, that is, they expect to receive what they are lacking: interaction, emotions, like-minded people, sense of community, a fulfilled dream, sense of belonging to a good cause, recognition of their efforts. As one interviewee related,

I come from a long line of military service, [I wanted] but didn’t follow my father’s steps...My dream started to fade away completely, but this is such emptiness that can't be filled... Joining [an organization] helped me take a step forward in terms of my education and... career development... this work resonates with me, because it resembles a military organization. (P13)
(2) Volunteers who join the organization “out of the positive”: these are self-sufficient people who are ready to share their time, happiness, experience, internal potential, knowledge and skills, financial resources. As one interviewee explained,

I taught workshops… I have many talents, in [one] situation, I taught [children from an orphanage] to knit… [in another situation,] my daughter and I taught a workshop on design. (P17)

As a result, engagement in formal volunteering happens based of a combination of motives: conscious and unconscious, pragmatic and altruistic. The finding supports earlier conclusion that volunteers are motivated by the desire to help and be useful. It is not related to personally experienced injustice and helplessness, but it is based either on the need to act in general, or on childhood impressions, or on religious motives (Russian Volunteering Movement Resources, 2013). According to one of the participants,

I am the ninth child in the family… [I am] a member of “Gideon” mission [Christian interchurch association, which distributes free Bibles in more than 94 languages in 194 countries]… if you see someone who needs help, he needs to be helped, and if you have the capacity, you need to help… this is how I was brought up, and I consider it a norm. (P18)

Engagement in formal volunteering is a consequence of complex intertwining of not only multiple motives of people but also conditions of the environment, as well as life circumstances. First, in the local community, an institutional environment has to be established: a combination of volunteering organizations and channels of communication with mass audience through distributing information in social networks, advertising in public space and so on. Sometimes the informants learned about the organizations by accident (from the Internet, advertising, or friends), and initially had no plans to participate, but as result of a set of circumstances they became engaged in volunteerism. An impetus for engagement could be a difficult life situation of the volunteer or someone in their close social circle (family members, colleagues, friends, and so on.) As one interviewee said,

At that time, I was going through a difficult divorce, and I just needed to keep my mind occupied with something… And for whatever reason, this activity somehow has taken root in me so much that now I won’t be leaving [the organization]. (P11)

According to Elias (1991), in postmodern society, increasing individualization not only allows the individual to feel free to set goals and act, but also strengthens the interdependency of the individuals within the local community.

4.4 Formal volunteering: The retention of “helpers”

As Milbourn et al. (2019) note, the retention of volunteers within organizations remains a significant challenge. The perceptions of demotivation of the volunteers involved in local volunteer organizations were examined through narrative interview.

Results of thematic analysis show that volunteers and leaders of volunteering organizations point to the main reason that influences volunteers’ decision to cease engagement: it is ‘disconnect between volunteer and organization’. From the participants’ point of view, the essence of volunteerism assumes the existence of individual needs, willingness, and mood to provide support “here and now.” A volunteering organization as a liaison between the ‘helper’ and the ‘recipient’ inevitably adds the element of coercion to this relationship. It sets the time and space, within which that support has to be provided, and the volunteer has to fit into that schedule. The perceptions of disconnect between the volunteer and the organization can arise at any moment, and even become a demotivating factor for engaging in formal volunteering. As one interviewee said,
I believe that help has to come from ethical, moral habits and beliefs, and not because you are being told what to do... it can be discouraging, because you are being forced. (P2)

Leaders of volunteering organizations confirm that disconnect between organizational and individual interests leads to psychological burnout as the main reason for decision to cease engagement. To prevent burnout, it is necessary to maintain “warm working climate” in the team, to take breaks from volunteering, and to align the goals of the organization with those of volunteers, as they have their own interests and needs. Interviewees commented that

The atmosphere in the team really matters: someone fits in, someone doesn’t... everyone has their own motives... if they even partially don’t match ours, if it interferes with our work, we part with such people. (P23)

and

I openly tell the volunteers that it is very important what you will take [from volunteering]. If you only give, you will burn out and leave quickly... it’s emotional burnout, when they get tired... we recommend them to take a break... you have to stop [volunteering] for at least one month in a year. (P24)

Volunteering organizations in the local community not only help scale up the practices of helping to different groups of people, but they also attract volunteers with different interests. This observation aligns with the research by Mousa and Freeland-Graves (2017), which claims that volunteering activities are conducive to meeting volunteers’ individual needs. If collective actions of people within the organization have a common vector and goals, it influences the retention of volunteers within organizations.

5. Conclusions

Despite the wide spectrum of volunteers’ motives – conscious and unconscious, pragmatic and altruistic – they share a great sense of responsibility for those members of the local community who need help and support. At the basis of formal and informal volunteering are initiative and willingness, and not coercion to socially approved actions.

Engagement in informal volunteering can be the result of upbringing (parents’ behavior patterns internalized in the process of socialization), as well as a rational decision in the context of a “social contract”. The experience of informal volunteering helps become a volunteer within organizations if the appropriate institutional environment in the local community has been established. Despite the fact that volunteers’ activities are oriented towards the well-being of other people, it contributes to meeting their own needs.

The findings demonstrate that, in post-modern society, there is a tendency for individual autonomy that gives an individual an opportunity to feel free to choose his or her own goals and actions, and it is accompanied by strengthening of mutual dependency of individuals within a social structure. A volunteering organization becomes a crossroads of individual needs and public interests. Besides the opportunity to express one’s individuality, it forms interdependencies among individuals through common goals in such a manner that their collective actions have a common vector, which is helping people in need in the local community.
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