

Panel Title: “Student Volunteering in Fifteen Countries: Strengthening Civil Society?”

Major Conference Theme: Volunteering and Social Capital

Panel Coordinator: Lesley Hustinx

Paper 1: “Societal contexts in student volunteering – a critical overview of cross-cultural definitions and differences”

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Paper 2: "Student Volunteering: Is it all about Resume building?"

Femida Handy (corresponding author), Lesley Hustinx, Chulhee Kang, Jeff Brudney, Bhagyashree Ranade,

Paper 3: “Voluntary Action among Students: A Cross-National Study.”

Kirsten Holmes (corresponding author), Debbie Haski-Leventhal, Ram Cnaan, Sinsa Zrinscak, Meenaz Kassam

Paper 4: ‘Student Volunteering and Building Trust: Social Capital as an Individual or Collective Asset?’

Lesley Hustinx (corresponding author), Lucas Meijs, Kirsten Holmes, Karen Smith

Theme of the panel

Research on citizen participation and voluntary action mainly looks at adolescents and adults – and tends to overlook an important age group that forms the bridge between them, namely university students. Today’s university students may be considered society’s elites of tomorrow and as such their pro-social behavior may give us an inclination of the future. If this age group appears to be civically disengaged, consequently, one could consider this a major threat for the future strength of civil society.

In recent times, there has been a progressive institutionalization of community service in institutions of higher education. These educational reforms aim at reinvigorating higher education’s social role and responsibility and are driven by a widely perceived decline in civic engagement among young people. It is argued that higher education should play a leading role in (re-)educating university students for active citizenship and teaching them the required norms and skills for participation in a democratic society and future community leadership.

But how do common relationships between voluntary participation, civil society, and social capital play out in this particular context and among this specific population? Higher education is the key for the required human capital for success in adulthood.

Without a university degree most vocations and position of power are difficult to reach. In most countries the three or four years of university solidify the transition from youth to adulthood and force young people to become more serious and understand the complexities of life. Many behaviors are no longer random or capricious but are calculated and well planned. Among these activities are the pro-social activities of volunteering and donating. University students assess their willingness to engage in such activities based their available resources (time and money), their support of the various causes, and the utility that these activities will bring with them.

Some of the benefits that are embedded in these pro-social activities are short term such as warm-glow and a sense of belonging to various campus groups. However, way less studied are the many long-term benefits. These long-term benefits also shape students' behaviors such as the expectation that graduate schools or employers view them more attractive candidates because they show civic engagement and social leadership. As such, pro-social activities by students may be utilitarian in nature.

In this respect, the extent to which universities can offer young people a truly 'transformative experience' that resonates in their future adult lives and civic behaviors could be questioned. To what extent do institutions of higher education succeed in fostering social capital and civic engagement among their students? How does the university context, and in particular service requirements, influence young people's perceptions of the functions and benefits of volunteering? To what extent do they treat civic engagement in a merely instrumental way; or beyond that, also consider its value for society at large? And how do these views differ across countries and differences in institutional and cultural contexts?

To examine these questions, a research group was formed with scholars from 15 countries in North America, Europe, Middle East, and the Asia Pacific. In each country, researchers sampled 600+ university students with a unified research instrument. Thus, data from over 9,000 students from these countries enable us to shed first light on the world of university student volunteering and donating from a cross-cultural perspective.

Paper 1: Societal contexts in student volunteering – a critical overview of cross-cultural definitions and differences

Voluntary participation, the motives for it and the amount of activity are all situated within cultural, political, religious and social contexts (Burns, 2000; Davis Smith, 1999). Social and societal factors can provide opportunities, expectations and requirements for volunteer activity, as well as influence the values and norms promoting such activity. These contexts are especially central in the case of voluntary participation among students as they are often responding to the societal demands for building a career and qualifying for future assignments (Handy et al. in this panel) and/or government requirements for completing community service.

The context of volunteering takes on different meanings in different settings (Handy, Cnaan, Brudney, Ascoli, Meijs & Ranade, 2000; Merrill, 2006). In this paper we provide an overview of key institutional and cultural differences in 15 countries participating in this study. We describe their political system and the size, composition, and role of civil society and the nonprofit sector, which form the background for voluntary participation. Compulsory voting and service requirements, for instance, can be argued to influence civic activity and yet also question the voluntary nature of volunteering (Tuan, 2005). On the other hand, different welfare models are connected to the societal needs and requirements for individual participation and the role of the third sector in each society. In general, policies regarding civil society differ to a great extent in the countries covered, and the effect of this in voluntary activity is central. For example, Western interpretations of volunteering are seen primarily within an individualistic model with a focus on the outcomes that are of value to the individual volunteer. This analysis may not be applicable to more collectivist societies (Tuan, 2005). In addition we describe cultural settings, such as religiosity, which affect values behind volunteering activity and motivation to volunteer in different countries.

This paper provides a reference for the empirical research project on student volunteering activity in 15 countries in North America, Europe, Middle East, and the Asia Pacific region. The cultural, political, religious and social differences and similarities between the participant countries are compared within the context of the survey findings. Particular attention is paid to the educational and legislative framework around community service and civic engagement as this has the potential to significantly influence students' decisions to engage in volunteering and other pro-social behaviour. This paper provides also a tool for the use of other research. Significant differences between individualistic and collectivist societies (Hofstede, 2001) are explored but also more subtle differences between similar cultures, even those within close geographical proximity but with different political and religious histories, such as Northern Europe and East Asia. Of equal interest are the similarities between apparently very different cultures, with correspondence analysis of students' motivations and benefits revealing a cluster for Croatia, Japan, Korea and the Netherlands and a cluster for Israel and Korea (Handy et al. in this panel). Methodological issues and difficulties of cross-cultural, comparative research are discussed critically in the light of the variety of contexts described in the scope of this project.

Paper 2: "Student Volunteering: Is it all about Resume building?"

This research takes the instrumentalist motives of volunteering, such as career enhancing prospects for students, as a starting point and posits that for such motives to survive volunteering must signal positive qualities in the market. Using a survey of students in 15 countries, we investigate participation rates and motivations for volunteering. We frame several hypotheses to test our premise that students volunteer for utilitarian reasons and as such use volunteering to build stronger and competitive resumes. We also test for differences across cultures in the use of volunteering experiences as appropriate signals to potential employers or admission officers

Individuals volunteer for a myriad of motives, and there is an extensive literature that examines the motives of volunteers in different settings and in different places (Cappellar & Turati, 2004; Cnaan & Goldberg, 1991; Clary, et al. 1998). Two classes of motivations dominate: those that are altruistic in nature and those that are utilitarian, although most respondents, when given a choice, select both kinds of motives. Thus besides volunteering for philanthropic factors, individuals also volunteer as a form of professional development – they choose volunteering activities that enhance their human capital, such as work experience and job training, develop new sets of skills, explore different careers paths, enhance their resumes, or make professional contacts. The benefits of doing so are to increase their long term earnings through getting a job or being accepted into institutions of higher learning. This is particularly true for students, who are making decisions to either enter the labour market or pursue higher education where in many cases volunteering experience appears to be a prerequisite.

This research thus takes the instrumentalist motives of career enhancing as a starting point and posits that for such instrumentalist motives to survive there must exist employers and admission officers who value an applicants volunteer experiences. Given that most volunteering activity is unpaid, and the net-cost to volunteer is positive, then this behavior will not be undertaken by all (Handy et al, 2000). And, only if volunteering signals certain positive qualities in the market, will individuals obtain this experience at some cost to themselves.

In this paper, we explore the possibility that volunteering activity and its signaling aspect in the market is not universal. A mechanism is more likely to be found in some contexts where employers and admission officers need signals, other than the usual educational achievements of applicants such as grades, training certificates or the like to assess applicants. A different belief structure in the value of volunteering and its incentive structure may discourage younger volunteers to volunteer, at least for utilitarian motives. They may volunteer for other reasons and would not likely report such experiences on their resumes. Specifically, we investigate whether student volunteering is ubiquitous across cultures, whether motives for such volunteering are utilitarian as posited, and if students use volunteering to enhance ones resumes, implying a signaling value for such experiences.

Paper 3: 'Voluntary Action among Students: A Cross-National Study'.

The 15-country study enables us to assess the benevolent behaviors of university students group as it pertains to volunteering and donating money. Our findings suggest that the future elite in each society is, on average, benevolent and engage in pro-social activities. Many students are engaged in one but not in both (volunteering and donating) benevolent activities suggesting their mutuality and replacement. The control variables are found to have significant effect on the benevolent behavior. Our implications call for instilling benevolent behavior in universities as the last stage of development in which people are still amenable to change.

Research on civic behavior mainly looks at adolescents and adults – and tends to overlook an important age group that forms the bridge between them, namely university students. Today's university students may be considered society's elites of tomorrow and as such their pro-social behavior may give us an inclination of the future (Youniss et al., 2002). If this age group appears to be civically disengaged, consequently, one could consider this a major threat for future community development and leadership (Mohan, 1994). Given that pro-social behavior may be culturally sensitive this study assesses students' pro-social behavior in 15 countries.

The ultimate celebration of the individual, "individualism" is not the egoism of self interest, but a deeper understanding and appreciation of what Goffman calls "the sacred self." This is the understanding which is expressed in a mutual concern for the welfare of others. Hunter and Milofsky (2007) noted that "A civil society is not a product, but a process. It is not a goal to be achieved, nor a project to be completed. Rather, it is a continuously emergent value, created and recreated in the everyday actions of its citizens." In this respect student engagement in a benevolent behaviors is shaping their life long attitudes and behaviors and create a culture of elite that is committed to be benevolent.

The 15-country study enables us to assess the benevolent behaviors of this group as it pertains to volunteering (if at all and how much) as well as donating money while controlling for age, years of education (first year – last year students), class, study discipline, and Country of residence.

Our findings suggest that the future elite in each society is, on average, benevolent and engage in pro-social activities. Many students are engaged in one but not in both (volunteering and donating) benevolent activities suggesting their mutuality and replacement. The control variables are found to have significant effect on the benevolent behavior. Our implications call for enhanced emphasis on instilling benevolent behavior in universities as the last stage of development in which people are still under the influence of a large system and are amenable to its expectations.

Paper 4: “Student Volunteering and Building Trust: Social Capital as an Individual or Collective Asset?”

This paper explores patterns of volunteering and donating behavior among university students and their relation with social trust. Unlike the usual focus on the (type, intensity, and scope of) membership in voluntary associations, this study examines the relationship between service requirements within institutions of education and students’ perceptions of the functions and benefits of volunteering on the one hand, and their levels of generalized social trust on the other. A truly ‘transformative education’ would foster the generalized capital that political scientists promote. However, it is also possible that such initiatives instead contribute to building individual social capital in the classic sociological sense, and consequently do not exceed the level of ‘instrumental education’. It is hypothesized that students who participate(d) in required service programs will embrace a more instrumentalist view on volunteering and score lower on generalized social trust in comparison to students who are/were not exposed to service learning but volunteered out of free choice.

In recent times, there has been a progressive institutionalization of community service in higher education. In American higher education, it has grown into a leading postsecondary educational reform reinvigorating higher education’s social role and responsibility. The generalized promotion of community service moreover can be understood as a response to a widely perceived decline in civic engagement among young people. It is argued that higher education should play a leading role in educating students for good citizenship and to teach them skills for participation in a democratic society. In contrast to the broad acceptance of community service in institutions of higher education, strikingly little is known about the actual extensity, nature, and correlates of students’ civic engagement.

This paper examines to what extent service learning initiatives succeed in offering young people a truly transformative experience by looking at the relationship between service requirements and students’ perceptions of the functions and benefits of volunteering on the one hand, and their levels of generalized social trust on the other. The goals of civic education are realized when it fosters the generalized capital that political scientists promote. Students in that case are taught the norms of cooperation and solidarity, and their involvement in civil society strengthens. However, if service requirements do not exceed the level of ‘instrumental education’, it rather contributes to building individual social capital in the classic sociological sense.

On the basis of these assumptions, it is hypothesized that students who participate(d) in required service programs will embrace a more instrumentalist view on volunteering, whereas students who are/were not exposed to service learning but volunteered out of free choice, will value higher the normative and social functions of volunteering, and score higher on generalized social trust.