

VOLUNTARY WORK. A FEW REMARKS ABOUT STUDENTS' SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF AND OPINIONS ON VOLUNTEERING

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Abstract

Voluntary work is directly related to social intervention and social economy. The motivation for engaging in volunteering depends on several variables, starting with the social status. Our aim here is to explain some of the conclusions that were drawn from a number of sociological researches conducted at the „A. I. Cuza” University of Iasi, Romania. The aim of the researches was to verify certain conclusions of previous studies or publications. Our results confirm that the rate of student participation in voluntary actions remains low, while some of the conclusions drawn from previous studies were not validated.

Key words: *volunteering, involvement, explanatory variables*

Introduction

A very good sociological description and analysis of volunteering can be found in an important book signed B. Voicu (2010, pp. 91-110). For this author, voluntary work is an „activity undertaken by free choice, without outside constraints, within the framework of an organization, that brings no immediate or direct financial benefits to the volunteer, but to others or to the community”. Another definition enhances the

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concept: „volunteering is work done of one’s own free will, in which an individual offers his/her time, skills and energy to support others, without receiving a financial compensation other than a reimbursement of expenses incurred while supporting the project he/she is involved in” (site www.provobis.ro, accessed on July 2012^[1]).

The benefits of voluntary work are multiple: new social relations, personal development of different skills, social recognition etc. Searching for a profile of the volunteer, M. Musick and J. Wilson (2008) studied at the same time biased dispositions (personality, motives, values, norms and attitudes) and individual resources (socioeconomic resources, time and health, gender and race). According to these two authors, generally speaking, the interest in studies on volunteering can be summarized in five main ideas:

- the continued transition from charitable works to aiding governmental agencies
- the continual search of volunteers for political identity
- the creation of social capital and involvement in democratic development through volunteer organizations
- the current tendency to rethink the nature of work (related to new forms of social economy)
- the evolution of NGOs to more rationalized forms inspired by the economic arena.

To different degrees we can notice these implications in Romania as well, including the municipality of Iasi, however from different researches we can also conclude that voluntary participation of Romanians remains very low (a few percentages of participation in voluntary organizations other than political parties, trade unions and religious organizations).

With reference to a profile of the Romanian volunteer, B. Voicu (2010, pp. 91-110) specifies that very relevant are *income*, *social capital* and *education*. Also, *age* is important (the youth are more likely to volunteer), the urban environment, the acceptance of risk etc. We can

[1] For more useful information, go to www.voluntariat.ro.

add here the cultural influences and the values associated with volunteering mediated by religion or general life principles (C. Rochester et al, 2010, pp. 17-19).

Students and voluntary work. Sociological research

The focus of a study on this topic could be the extent of voluntary work among students in Romania (who have the qualities already mentioned: they are young, they have a high educational background and a significant relational capital, and they come mostly from the urban area). Unfortunately we don't have any studies regarding students' engagement in voluntary work and for that reason we shall limit our considerations to the students of „A. I. Cuza” University of Iasi (UAIC). The objectives of our research were as follows:

- to evaluate the social representation of volunteering;
- to evaluate the extent to which there is a well-founded opinion about volunteering;
- to evaluate the focus of voluntary work: personal development or resolution of social problems;
- to evaluate the variables that may explain the motivation for volunteering.

The great majority of the UAIC students come from Iasi district and from the neighboring districts. In this case, we believe it is easier to identify the motivation for participating in voluntary work as early as high school. Many testimonies from the local press can prove relevant here: young pupils accepted by certain universities stated that selection interviews included questions about their extracurricular activities and voluntary work^[1]. These young people declared that they began to prepare from the first high school year in order to secure a successful enrolment at the university. We can conclude that participation in voluntary work can be relevant for teenagers who seek to attend

^[1] See the article „Elevii admisi deja la universitati celebre”, *Ziarul de Iasi*, 20.01.2011, accessed on 15. 07.2012.

universities abroad. There may be other types of activities that could be seen as useful in this sense, but it is difficult to separate voluntary work from compulsory school activities such as those which are part of the *A Different Kind of School* program.

We did not find nationwide researches concerning students, but we conducted studies at the level of the „A. I. Cuza” University from Iași. The oldest Romanian university, it has 23,000 undergraduate students and 7,000 graduate students enrolled in master programs. We conducted a social research on a representative sample of 533 students with a $\pm 4.2\%$ margin of error at a 95% level of confidence^[1]. The structure of the sample was as follows:

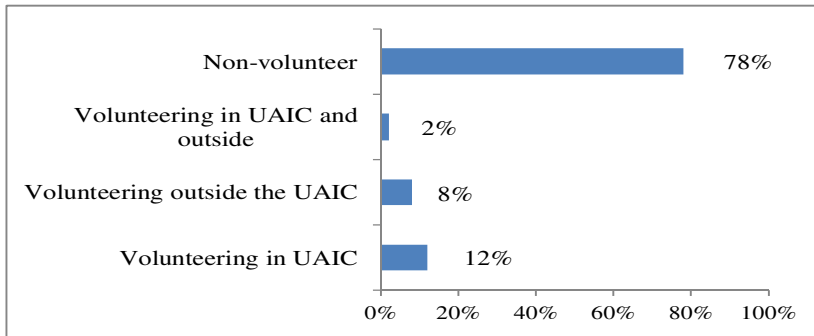
Table 1. *Structure of the student sample*

Features		Proportions
Gender	Male	30%
	Female	70%
Studies	Undergraduate degree	93.5%
	Master degree	6.5%
Residence	Urban	64%
	Rural	33%

In this research we aimed to describe students' social representations of volunteering and the difference between positive attitude and lack of involvement. The conclusive percentages obtained with regard to involvement can be seen below:

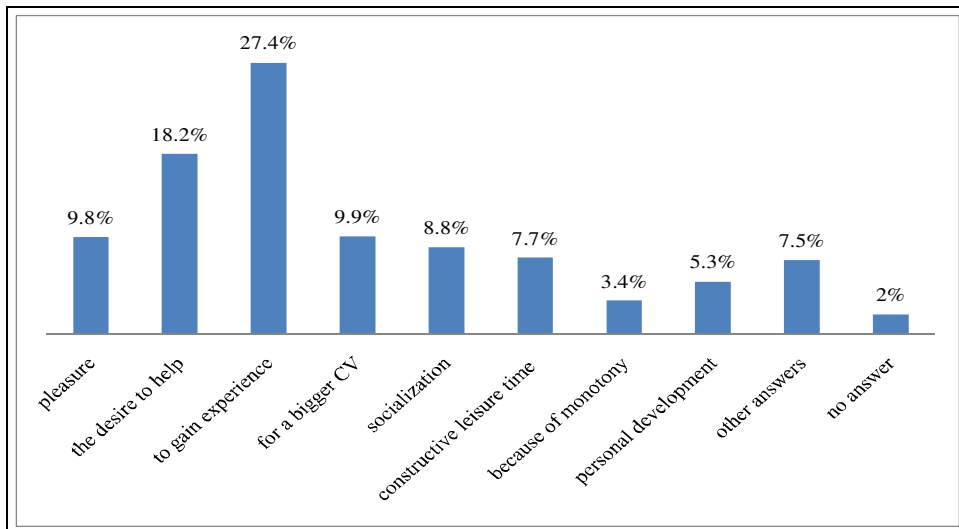
^[1] Survey conducted during 20-25 May 2011 by students, members of ASAFFI Association, „A.I. Cuza” University.

Figure 1. Details about engagement in voluntary work



Unfortunately, 78% of the students said they are not working /did not work with any volunteer organizations and the great majority of the remaining 12% are involved in student/university organizations^[1]. Despite this situation, students had a positive opinion with regard to voluntary activities. We asked the students what would motivate them to engage in voluntary work (multiple answers):

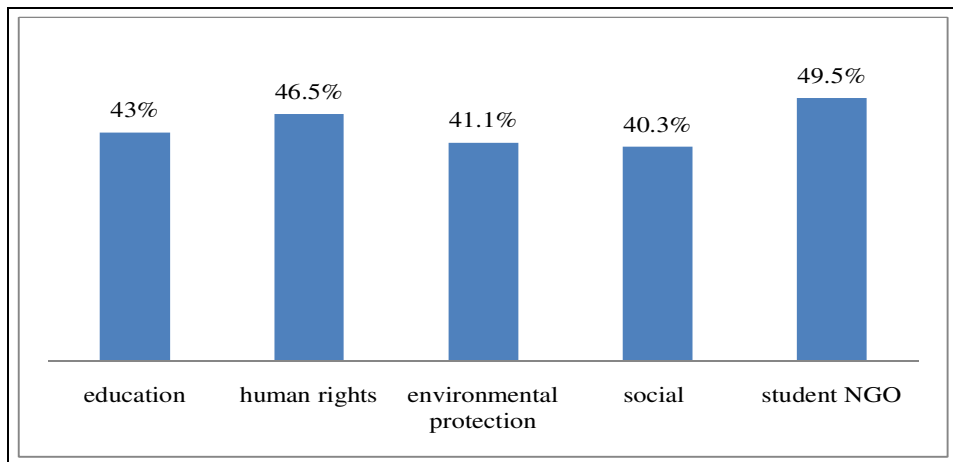
Figure 2. Motivation for engaging in voluntary work



^[1] A. I. Cuza University of Iasi has 26 active student organizations and two foundations.

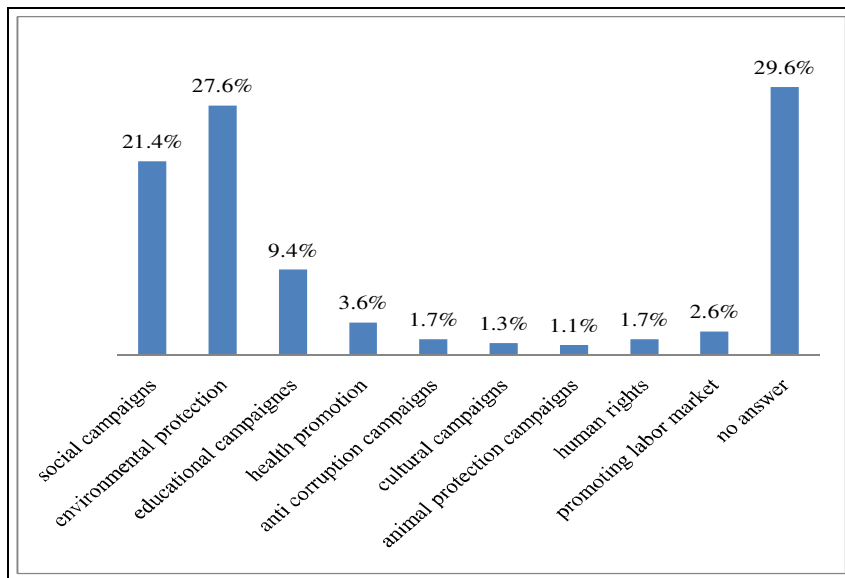
In Figure 2 we see that *personal experience* is regarded highest; one explanation could be that experience is a prerequisite when applying for a job^[1]. Only 2% of the respondents didn't have an opinion. The survey data also showed that respondents had a clear notion of voluntary work ($\chi^2=272$, $df=9$, Asymp. Sig.=0.000). If they were to choose a field of work to volunteer in, their preferences would be those shown in the chart below (multiple answers):

Figure 3. *What field of work would you choose to volunteer in?*



Other preferences of the respondents where: health, sports, culture and animal protection. But there is a difference between personal preferences and social needs. For Romania, students said the most important volunteering activities could be the following:

^[1] In other words, we are underlying here the need to train human resources in relation to the perceived utility of work! (see C. Gavriluta, 2011).

Figure 4. Main fields of work for voluntary activities in Romania

We were interested in defining the motivation for engaging in voluntary work. In relation to other studies as well, we assume the motivation for participating in voluntary work depends on a few variables: gender, age, type of studies (undergraduate degree or master degree), specialization (social and humanistic studies vs. other specializations), area of residence (urban vs. rural), and employment status (employed vs. unemployed).

We applied a binomial regression with regard to *volunteer involvement* (as a dependent variable) and *gender* (as the independent variable), testing the odds ratio in this case. For 533 cases, 415 declared non-involvement while 118 respondents declared involvement in voluntary organizations in UAIC or outside UAIC or both concurrently. Hence, $415/533=78\%$ are the non-involved students or, in statistical terms, there are 78% chances that students are not involved. If we calculate the odds ratio we conclude that its value is $118/415=0.284$. This is the result obtained without factoring in the gender variable, only the constant of the model. By introducing the *gender* independent

variable, the null hypothesis about the precision of the model is validated. This conclusion is confirmed by the crosstabs analysis:

Table 2. *The cross-tabulation of involvement and gender variables*

			gender		Total
			female	male	
Involved	Not involved	Count	294	121	415
		Expected Count	291.2	123.8	415.0
		% within involved	70.8%	29.2%	100.0%
	Involved	Count	80	38	118
		Expected Count	82.8	35.2	118.0
		% within involved	67.8%	32.2%	100.0%
Total		Count	374	159	533
		Expected Count	374.0	159.0	533.0
		% within involved	70.2%	29.8%	100.0%

In this case we cannot confirm any association for $\chi^2=0.407$, $df=1$, $p=0.523$. Therefore, we cannot conclude that mainly males or mainly females are involved in volunteering.

Another regression model included the *involved* dependent variable and the *age* independent variable and in the end the value of Exp B (odds ratio) was high and we don't have a conclusion about the influence of *age* on the motivation for getting involved in voluntary work. We tried to analyze the difference between means for the ages of the students involved and the students not involved in volunteering. The results were as follows:

Table 3. *The analysis of differences between means*

Categories	Mean	Independent sample T test
Involved	20.86	t (531) = -2.06
Not involved	21.23	F=3.33 p=0.04

For the value of $t(531) = -2.06$ and $p < 0.05$ we reject the null hypothesis and accept that there is a significant difference between means. On average, the involved students are younger than those not involved, but this result can be accepted at the limit point. Next, we extended the cross tabulation analysis to more variables as illustrated below:

Table 4. Cross-tabulation between the involved dependent variable and the study domains, types of studies, employment, area of residence independent variables.

Variables	Involved		n	χ^2	df	p
	Not involved	Involved				
Study domains						
- Other domains	218	50	268	3.71	1	0.05
- Social and humanistic studies	197	68	265			
Total	415	118	533			
<i>Types of studies</i>						
-master degree	25	9	34	0.391	1	0.53
-undergraduate degree	390	109	499			
Total	415	118	533			
<i>Employment status</i>						
-not employed	367	104	471	0.191	1	0.65
-employed	33	11	44			
Total	400	115	515			
<i>Area of residence</i>						
-rural	144	30	174	3.6	1	0.05
-urban	257	83	340			
Total	401	113	514			

We can observe that there are some weak associations between the involved dependent variable and the study domains and residence independent variables (but the power of the effect is very low). Surprisingly, students not employed are however not motivated to become involved in

voluntary work (we obtained equal percentages for the students involved in volunteering regardless of their employment status).

Continuing with another research conducted in May 2012 on a representative sample of 704 students, with a $\pm 3.6\%$ margin of error and a 95% level of confidence^[1]. Here we analyzed the influence in volunteering of *life satisfaction* (LS), satisfaction with educational training (SE) or religiosity (REL). The LS variable is a satisfaction index calculated as a factorial score as follows:

Table 5. *The factorial analysis for construction of indexes*

LS	Communalities	Saturations
Satisfaction with family life	0.334	0.578
Satisfaction with leisure time	0.322	0.567
Satisfaction with personal health	0.211	0.459
Explained variance	52.5%	
KMO	0.617	
Bartlett Test	P<0.0001	
SE		
Satisfaction with studies	0.489	0.699
Satisfaction with studying conditions	0.575	0.759
Satisfaction with professors' qualities	0.443	0.665
Satisfaction with success after studies	0.205	0.453
Explained variance	56.2%	
KMO	0.739	
Bartlett Test	P<0.0001	
Note: Extraction Method: Principal axis factoring		
Reliability Analysis Alpha Cronbach = 0.64 (LS); 0.72 (SE)		

After analyzing the data, we observed that only the SE index can enter a regression model with the *involved* variable. The results were:

^[1] Survey conducted between 20-25 May 2012 by the master students in Political sciences, „A.I. Cuza” University.

Table 6. Regression model

Included	95% CI for Exp b			
	B	Lower	Exp b	Upper
Constant	0.389	0.862	0.922	0.987
SE Index	-0.08			

R²=3.09 (Hosmer & Lemeshow), 0.00 (Cox & Snell), 0.01 (Nagelkerke).

The value of Exp b=0.92 demonstrates that the importance of the SE Index is significant but the influence between variables is low.

In the end, we observed that the respondents' statement regarding religious life had no significant impact either.

Conclusions

Contrary to previous research, our results are also specific: gender, type of studies (undergraduate degree or master degree), employment status (employed vs. unemployed), satisfaction with life or each respondent's indication as to whether they consider themselves a religious persons or not - don't have a real impact on the motivation for becoming a volunteer. At the other end, other variables such as age, specialization (social and humanistic studies vs. other specializations), and area of residence (urban vs. rural) have some influence but a low one. Also the impact of satisfaction with the educational training is significant but limited. These conclusions are not surprising given the reduced number of volunteers. In this case we can see some studies where the p values are deliberately increased. It's a sign that other qualitative data can be added to this kind of research. Generally speaking, we conclude that students show a reduced openness to voluntary engagement which is usually about activities in the academic environment and far less about solving real social problems. At the same time, the social representation of/opinions on volunteering, though diverse, are well-founded. The real openness to social problems

or other activities specific of social economy remains only a theoretical discussion framework!

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