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The Psychological and Spiritual Dimension of Volunteering

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Abstract: Volunteering is one of the oldest human social cooperation activities. Whether it is called volunteering, whether it is called charity, whether it is in the form of social involvement and active participation in the public agenda, whether it is a small-scale or extremely large-scale activity, in niche fields or in traditional fields, organized on the basis of state-sponsored programs or non-governmental institutions, over time, volunteering has represented a clear manifestation of social cohesion. This form of social cohesion can come from a psychological need that some individuals satisfy by volunteering, or from a desire for personal development, or from adherence to certain religious precepts, but regardless of the motivation, the social utility and social responsibility of volunteering have been demonstrated over time. This paper aims to analyze the psychological and religious dimension of volunteering, from the perspective of its social utility and the responsibility that volunteering involves.

Keywords: *volunteering, volunteer psychology, personal development through volunteering, religious dimension of volunteering, social utility, social responsibility.*

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1. Introduction

People get involved in volunteer activities as a form of communication, belonging to a group or to reach a certain threshold of personal development. Internationally, volunteering offers opportunities to get to know different cultures, to learn what tolerance, diversity and respect for universal values are.

From a legal point of view, volunteering is an activity of public interest carried out by natural persons, called volunteers, within legal relationships, other than the legal employment relationship and the civil legal relationship for the provision of a remunerated activity. Socially, volunteering is the activity carried out on one's own initiative, by a person who dedicates their time, energy and talent to help others, without receiving a financial reward in return (Cnaan et al., 1996).

Psychologically, the activities through which a person gives their resources to those in need are also beneficial for volunteers, as they help to create intense relationships with other members of society and the cohesion of individuals that have the same concerns, as well as the development of new skills, helping the volunteer to feel fulfilled by contributing to the good of the community or an individual. On a spiritual level, volunteering is the practical manifestation of the precept of loving one's neighbor.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the psychological and religious dimensions of volunteering, from the perspective of social utility and the responsibility that volunteering involves.

2. The psychological dimension of volunteering

It is true that volunteering is not remunerated, but this does not mean that the volunteer perceives their activity as work without any benefit, because volunteering offers positive emotions of a major intensity, by increasing self-esteem, as well as the feeling of self-value through the contribution the volunteer makes to society (Shagurova et al., 2016). Volunteering is not only about dedication and altruism, but also about responsibility and commitment. When the activity is undertaken consciously and seriously, volunteering helps individuals develop intellectually, grow spiritually and invest in their emotional intelligence.

The psychological and behavioral traits of volunteers are associated with their antecedents, their experiences, and the consequences that these had on the person. Antecedents include helping dispositions, motivations, and social support. The more the volunteers identify with the mission of the institution that organizes the volunteering activity, it affects their satisfaction

and organizational commitment and finally the intention to remain a volunteer (Metzer, 1996).

From this point of view, there are several categories of volunteers: enthusiastic volunteers (Sana (Nemțeanu), 2016) represent the category of volunteers motivated by significant personal experiences, which presuppose a high degree of emotional involvement. These volunteers, although initially very satisfied with the activities carried out by volunteering, do not have a constant and long-term organizational commitment, because the emotional experience that generated adherence to the voluntary activity generated a series of needs that voluntary activity cannot completely satisfy. Therefore, these volunteers will tend to satisfy their psychological needs through intense but short-term engagement.

Volunteers that have a sustained contribution (Sana (Nemțeanu), 2016) represent the category of volunteers who contribute in a real and extensive way to the sustainability of volunteering activities. These people get involved in voluntary actions out of a sense of duty, because they have received support through volunteers or a family member has been supported by such activities. In this sense, the people involved want to reward the benefit received by providing free hours of work.

Unmotivated volunteers (Sana (Nemțeanu), 2016) are not necessarily attracted to the values of volunteering, nor do they perform meaningful work in the volunteer team. What these volunteers seek is to receive public recognition or thanks, they are focused on their own satisfaction and see volunteering as a springboard for career ambitions. This category also includes many people who, in order to engage with a work contract, are forced to overcome the lack of work experience in the respective activity, and although they want a financially motivating job, they feel forced to volunteer in order to be able to report work experience for a possible job interview.

Volunteers that manifest a high intention to give up volunteering (Sana (Nemțeanu), 2016) are a special category, generally of people who felt attracted by the message requesting enrollment as a volunteer, but over time they came to the conclusion that there is a big difference between the message communicated and the nature of the activity, and the desire to withdraw is the result of negative experiences, lack of support or ethics within the organization. In general, these are idealistic people who require support, training and reward for their activity, who feel insecure, do not have good communication and social integration skills, are shy, have difficulty adapting to new things, have difficulties working in a competitive environment and under time pressure, but all these shortcomings will be projected on the way in which the volunteering activity is organized and

there will not be an assumption of their own incapacity, therefore, if they leave volunteering, they will further communicate their negative experience to other people.

It was observed that the volunteers develop a series of psychological traits, including (Matsuba et al., 2007): empathy (understanding the mental state of the beneficiary and supporting them); the ability to reformulate and synthesize the ideas of others, especially when they have conflicting potential, in order to defuse conflicts, which presupposes a good self-management of one's own internal conflicts; active listening capacity (encourages beneficiaries and collaborators and contributes to clarifying misunderstandings); the ability to ask questions (presupposes the ability to combine open and closed questions and to adapt the type of question to the topic it addresses).

These skills are the result of an inner balance obtained from a better knowledge of human nature, which supports the volunteer's psychological balance. Also, the volunteer learns from the experience of others, which they take on as positive or negative examples, adhering to certain emotional states within the group, which increases optimism and the feeling of belonging, cohesion, removes the feeling of loneliness, anxiety and insecurity in one's own strengths (Windsor et al., 2008). All this generates the ability to create and maintain a positive atmosphere (which involves the transmission of feelings of relaxation, calmness, sympathy that stimulate discussion, expressing clearly and using appropriate language during discussions).

3. The religious dimension of volunteering

Volunteering and charity are very old values, they are found in all religions as a form of serving one's neighbor. Volunteering is an activity through which some people feel they can get closer to the divine (Veerasamy et al., 2015). The desire to volunteer is actually the desire to give, to become one with the one who is in need, to become one whole with the divine world.

From a spiritual point of view, volunteering is opposed to the idea that the individual has the inclination to deal only with things that serve himself and his individuality. Volunteering is done to serve others. In Christianity, man is made to love, the individual is built to go out of himself to meet the other (Grönlund, 2012). This fact, in one way or another, will manifest itself in the lives of individuals, because it is a power inserted in each individual by the Creator, regardless of the pressures or hardships suffered, the character of each individual or any external obstacles.

Orthodox spirituality is by its very nature communal. This means that it is a spirituality that also considers the other, that exists through the other. Since society is developing rapidly, the Church constantly needs new types of volunteering, both institutionalized and atypical. Christian precepts warn that it is very easy for a volunteer to slip into an attitude of power, of authority over the one they help, to determine them to do something, to command them (Paxton et al., 2014). If the help given through volunteering is addressed to people (that is, it does not focus, for example, on ecological activities) and is connected with sensitive existential topics, the volunteer can very easily feel that they are superior to the other. The desire to give is not only about volunteering, but generally concerns a type of morality, attitude, ethos.

From a religious point of view, the volunteer needs spiritual maturity, so that they do not feel repulsion towards people in difficult situations or with unbalanced behaviors. Individuals tend to be afraid of the difference between themselves and others, especially when the difficult situation in which the others find themselves is based on choices of will that the volunteer, for one reason or another, did not accept. The lack of spiritual maturity can either make them turn away from volunteering, or they will want to behave fatherly towards the other, or they will want to subjugate and reorient them. It takes a lot of maturity to be able to avoid the danger of such an approach (van Tienen et al., 2011).

It is necessary for the volunteer to have a sense of unity with others who are involved in volunteer actions similar to the one they are doing. A person cannot volunteer in every field and specialization is needed. While every individual has the inclination to take an interest, to concern himself with their neighbor, the character of each will be the one that determines where and how they will apply this inclination, taking into account both their good faith and their own shortcomings (Grönlund, 2012). Much more, it is fundamentally necessary for the volunteer to be concerned with the way and the mentality in which volunteering is carried out, because from a spiritual point of view, not every path is desirable, just to reach a goal.

4. Volunteering and personal development

The fact that more and more citizens get involved in voluntary actions and that the appreciation of those who choose to be volunteers is increasing proves the social and cultural maturity of the citizens. All individuals want prosperity, security, a rich culture and a decent life. And through volunteering, any citizen can make the change they want in society.

In order for each person to identify the niche in which they can capitalize on their skills and the need for involvement, the support of

professionals is needed to encourage and guide them in that endeavor. The main skills that develop through volunteering are the following (Epure, 2013): the ability to identify potential human resources in the community; interpersonal relationship skills: to speak freely and make presentations in public in a relaxed manner; the ability to cultivate and have relationships with a large number of people; good managerial skills: to analyze and distribute the activities into punctual tasks, to be given to the volunteers; to manage details and work efficiently; to delegate accordingly; the ability to take over and adapt new ideas from other contexts to the special needs of the organization they belongs to or collaborate with.

Mainly, volunteers end up developing certain qualities more than most members of society, in order to successfully face the multitude of responsibilities they have to manage, regarding the beneficiaries, but also the management of resources and the optimization of their own activity, personal qualities among which we can list (MacNeela & Gannon, 2014): enthusiasm and energy; a good understanding of the phenomenon of the expansion of the volunteering activity and the diversification of community resources; a broad perspective regarding the possibilities of involving individuals in socially useful activities, as well as on what society can obtain from collaboration with volunteers; knowledge of the management of material and human resources; the development of solid knowledge in the field in which the volunteering activity is carried out; the desire for self-improvement and continuous learning; developing skills to train others; good self-organization and prioritization of activities according to their importance.

In terms of personal development, the volunteering activity brings along a series of improvement of certain individual qualities, among which we can enumerate (Khasanzyanova, 2017): developing the ability to set clear objectives for one's own activity, but also for the activity of a team; increasing the ability to perform under stressful or less optimal conditions; confidence; communication skills (to know how to listen to others and to communicate easily with those around); providing formal and informal constructive feedback; addressing problems with diplomacy; emphasizing the positive aspects of things; the ability to be empathetic and know how to react in different situations; increasing empathy and sensitivity; the ability to see the whole without losing sight of the details.

Regarding the link between the development of personal skills and social skills (Huidu, 2021), or putting these skills in charge of progress in interpersonal relationships, volunteering can help a remarkable evolution of certain personal qualities (Epure, 2013): the ability to make decisions and act accordingly; the ability to take calculated risks; creativity and combating rigidity or preconceived notions; fairness in decision-making; ability to

delegate tasks; the ability to self-motivate and motivate others; team work; the ability to complete tasks and to focus on the essentials; flexibility and quick adaptability to new situations; the ability to be an example for those around; the ability to constantly respect ethical principles.

5. The social utility of volunteering and the social responsibility of the volunteer

The more citizens get involved in the life of the community in which they live and are active through voluntary actions, the more social cohesion increases, respectively the quality of life. Precisely because volunteering is an activity of utility and social responsibility, it is necessary for this activity to have credibility for the general public. For this reason, volunteering must be carried out transparently and by professionals (Poussou-Plesse et al., 2014). However, the reality is that the vast majority of volunteers are not professionals, or more precisely, if the number of people who volunteer were limited only to professionals, then volunteering action would be drastically reduced. For this reason, it is necessary for the people who coordinate the volunteering activity to be professionals in the respective field, in order to ensure that no potentially harmful mistakes result from the volunteering activity.

For this reason, volunteering is often organized by associations, foundations, non-governmental organizations specialized in such activities. The existence of a set of policies and procedures demonstrates - to the extent that they are applied - the professionalism and commitment of the institution organizing the volunteer activity to the way volunteers are involved, which offers specific advantages and benefits both to the organization and to the volunteers (Muthuri et al., 2009).

The main benefits are (Farooq et al., 2009): clarity of the hierarchy (volunteers will know their rights and responsibilities better and will know where to turn in case of a problem); saving time, efficiency and productivity (decision-making does not require prolonged discussions every time); conflict prevention (reduces the possibility of conflicts breaking out with the employees of the collaborating institutions or with the beneficiaries of the volunteering activity); depersonalization of the decision-making process and of the conflict (accusations of favoritism and/or discrimination are avoided); consistency (volunteers and employees are treated equally and will apply the same treatment to all collaborators or beneficiaries); safety (volunteers always know their position and the duties they are responsible for); satisfaction (because they joined a professional organization); respect (volunteers feel important for the organization and for society); commitment

(volunteers are more attached to the organization when they feel valued, protected and important).

6. Conclusions

Volunteering has a major impact on both the volunteer and those who benefit from it. By engaging in voluntary actions, the volunteer not only makes a real contribution to society, but also develops as an individual, both personally and professionally. Those who choose to volunteer have a wide range of advantages, including gaining professional experience, broadening their professional network, interacting with people with different views and experiences, and developing a consistent set of interpersonal and innovative situation management skills.

One of the known benefits of volunteering is the impact on the community. Volunteers are often the factor that holds a community together. Volunteering allows a person to connect with and transform the community they live in. In psychological terms, volunteering is the activity carried out by a person who dedicates time and involvement, and makes available their skills and competencies, with the aim of contributing to a cause in which they strongly believe, without expecting anything in return. From a spiritual point of view, by volunteering, a person does a good deed, which also enjoys favorable consequences for their own development, as rewards are not only spiritual but sometimes concrete, consisting of the development of certain skills.

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