

Theoretical Framework for the Development of Community Sense

Abstract

The paper focuses on the quite original and not much discussed subject of the relationship between volunteerism and community sense, whose support in Czech society has great potential for the development and functioning of a humane-oriented civil society. First, the paper depicts both concepts and capacity of volunteering utilization in the development of the community sense. Then it emphasizes two promising ways of volunteering support that take into account the educational and developmental context. These are the development of prosocial values and positive shaping of youth happiness. As the presented findings indicate, the individual happiness impacts on both the individual's prosocial orientation and willingness to volunteer that is enhanced also by prosocial values.

Keywords: *community, community sense, volunteering, prosocial values, happiness*

Introduction

The paper presents a theoretical proposal of a scheme of relations between several concepts whose mutual relations emerge separately in the literature and whose complex connections may offer space for extending the positive development of the individual in terms of his personality and life satisfaction as well as from the perspective of contemporary society needs (in terms of promoting civic awareness, responsibility and involvement). This need seems topical, due to the increasing

orientation of the contemporary generation to individualistic and consumerist values (Sak, 2000).

Community and community sense

The concept of *community* is not too widespread in the Czech Republic (as well as in other Central European countries). It illustrates poor attention paid to the term “community” in the Czech literature (e.g. dictionaries) in comparison with other countries (Hartl, 1997).

In our circumstances the communities are mostly perceived as groups of individuals associated primarily by a specific objective, meaning or link. We can thus speak of a therapeutic community, drug community, the community of marijuana users, religious community, etc. The community in the social, psychological (or civic) sense is more or less missing (elements of civic communities can be observed more likely in the country/villages).

In our conditions we can mention declared efforts of many volunteer organizations to strive for “the development of civic society“, which can be understood as exertions to promote a model substantially similar to the community. From communities they differ declaratively in a broader societal approach that is targeted selectively and specifically (mostly in the form of help for a specific group in need).

The importance of the topic of communities in relation to Czech society is based on the fact that in the last decades Czech society has faced weakening of civic engagement and that the principles of communities have many positive implications, and consequences, both generally and in comparison with the current approach in Czech society. We mention a few of these benefits for illustration.

Unlike volunteerism that focuses on helping by-problem-defined groups, the community is a socio-geographical group. It is therefore defined as a group of people in a certain area or place (it can be a district, neighborhood, ethnic or cultural territory, small town, village, etc.), in which further interconnections and interactions (including helping) are secondary and based on membership in the community (Hartl, 1997).

Compared to the generally defined effort to develop a civil society (the nation), the community is connected with a smaller and more closely interconnected social structure. It is thus easier to initiate, develop and maintain appropriate processes (i.e. help for the sick or elderly, participation in social activities, etc.), since they are built on personal relationships in a small circle of individuals. This is a more efficient model than the concept of civil society as a whole nation (where some

of the mechanisms, processes and links cannot operate and the whole concept is getting into a more abstract plane). The existence of these (geographically) closer relationships figuratively develops the personal commitment and social responsibility of individuals in relation to society as a whole (through personal experience with the needs of its members). The community increases the involvement of citizens, their interest in public affairs, trust in the possibility to influence events and general political and civic responsibility.

Involvement in the community has a positive impact on its members by extending the number of social ties to the others (that are also more stable), creating a social support network, reducing the level of alienation in the modern world, or by offering a greater sense of meaning and thus increasing life satisfaction, etc.

In this context, we understand the *community sense* as the sensation of binding to a specific group of individuals and the associated shared responsibility for the functioning of this group.

Even from this brief overview it is possible to suppose that support of the development of the community sense brings many positives both for individuals and for society at different levels of generality or in different areas. The following text outlines the possible way of the community sense development through support of volunteering and the enhancement and support of the individual's qualities that sustain the participation in volunteer activities.

Volunteering as the way to the community sense

Penner (2002, p 448) defines *volunteering* as a “long-term, planned prosocial behavior from which benefit the others and which appears in the organized environment.” United Nations Volunteers (Hockenos, 2001) in their definition of volunteering highlight three basic characteristics: 1) the activity is not performed for financial reward (although some spending is paid), 2) the activity is done voluntarily, based on the free will of individuals, and 3) the activity brings benefit for someone other than the volunteer, or for society in general (although the personal benefit of the volunteer is not excluded). Volunteering thus involves a number of different activities, divisible into four areas: mutual aid or self-help; philanthropy, service to others; participation or civic engagement; and advocacy or campaigning.

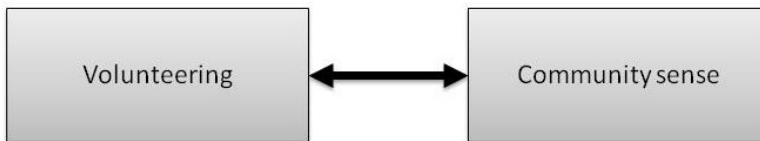
The importance of volunteering has been described for many years primarily in the context of economic benefit that can be seen as direct and indirect. The direct benefit is the saving of expenses (wages, insurance, etc.). These savings are regularly denominated in billions of dollars per year. Indirect effect then comes out from

the benefit of volunteers' work (e.g., the money saved on the caregiver, the positive effect of volunteering on health status in relation to the costs of health insurance, etc.) (e.g., Ironmonger, 2006; Balandino, Llewellyn, Dew, Ballin, 2006).

In terms of this contribution, individual and social benefits are of more significance. For individuals volunteering is an opportunity to acquire new skills and experience, strengthen the feeling of belonging to the company, increase self-esteem, expand their career opportunities in the future, create new interests and hobbies. Similarly, volunteering can have a positive effect on the mental and physical health of the individual (Libretto, Yore, Buchnre Schmid, 2005; Li, 2004; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, Tang, 2003). As Mlčák and Pečtová (2011, p.2) also state, volunteering “increases sophistication of interpersonal relationships, strengthens social cohesion, the overall moral level of society and is a source of significant economic benefits”, which are the principles and processes characteristic of a civic community.

We can thus assume the relationship between volunteering and the community sense expressed graphically in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The relationship between volunteering and community sense



The mutual relationship is reciprocal, because volunteering has the potential to develop the community sense that additionally increases the involvement of individuals in society, and thus supports willingness to volunteer.

Given this assumption and also the tradition of volunteering in the Czech Republic, and similar internal mechanisms and processes in the participants of volunteering and community services, the promotion of volunteering and volunteer orientation appears as one of the most promising ways of developing the community sense. In the contemporary literature two interconnected routes leading to this goal emerge. It is the direction of development towards acquiring pro-social values and, further, the support and influence of youth happiness.

Pro-social values as a means to volunteering

Recent findings confirm the existence of links between prosocial values and volunteering (e.g., Schuyt & Bekkers, 2005; Selbee & Reed, 2002). This relationship can be perceived in two general processes related to volunteering: selection and causation. Selection means that volunteers have more prosocial values before the initiation of volunteering. Causation means that volunteering causes changes in social values in individuals in a more pro-social direction.

Theoretical explanation of the *selection process* is based on the fact that, in contrast to economic approaches where all individuals are assumed to be equal, social psychologists assume that individuals in social dilemma situations differ in the weight they attach to the wellbeing of themselves and others (Van Lange, 2000), leading to different willingness to cooperate with others in these situations (van Lange, 1999). From this perspective it is possible to divide the individual to prosocial-oriented and proself-oriented (or individualistic-oriented), when both groups perceive social dilemma situations differently (cognitively) and consider different aspects of the situation in their decision making.

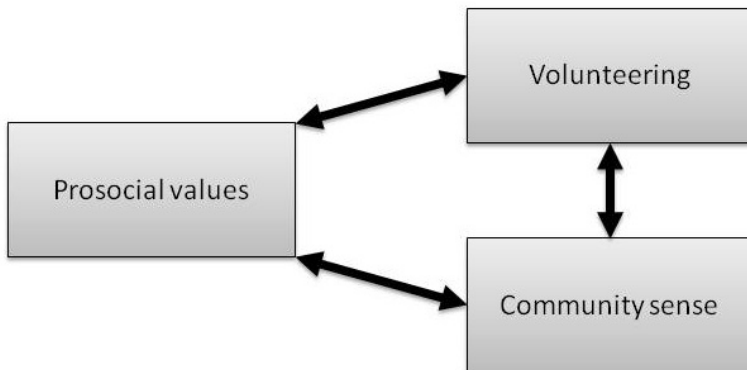
The evaluation of social dilemma situations is related to the valuation of outcomes, because, as indicated above, prosocial-oriented individuals attach greater weight to the outcomes for others. Van Lange (1999) names this phenomenon a *social value orientation* and supposes that pro-social oriented individuals focus not only on outcomes for the others, but also on the equality of outcomes. This is confirmed by other studies, which show that the demand for equality is greater than the focus on outcomes for the others (Eek & Gärling, 2006). This is accompanied by greater *social responsibility* (De Cremer & Van Lange, 2001), which in total results in a greater interest in equality in society and socially responsible conduct. Prosocial-oriented individuals also more markedly evaluate social dilemma situations from the perspective of *morality*, where non-participation is perceived as immoral (Liebrand et al., 1986) and one's own costs are assessed as lower than in pro-self-oriented individuals (Cameron et al., 1998).

Causation process used to be explained by a Group socialization theory (Parsons, 1951) and Self-perception theory (Bem, 1972). The *Group socialization theory* assumes that the successful functioning of an individual is dependent on the success of socialization within the group. The group has (among other things) the ability to create social pressure on the individual to change and master specific values (Hooghe, 2003). We can also conclude that socialized values are gradually internalized and generalized to most areas of life (Kohn & Schooler, 1982).

The *Self-perception theory* in the context of volunteering describes how participation in volunteer activities affects and supports the individual's self-image of a "helpful person" (DeJong, 1979). This increases the likelihood and willingness to be more involved in volunteering (Schwartzwald et al., 1983), develops an altruistic self-identity (Piliavin & Callery, 1991) and increases adherence to pro-social values (Bekkers, 2006).

These above-mentioned findings are also confirmed by our findings from the GA ČR project "Prosocial behavior and personality aspects in the context of volunteering".

Figure 2. Mutual relation of prosocial values, volunteering and community sense



Speaking of certain prosocial values that should be cultivated, besides the social value orientation we also emphasize generalized trust, social responsibility and *altruistic values*. The *Generalized trust* expresses the expectation that the others will be trustworthy (Uslaner, 2002). The social responsibility is linked to the philanthropic behavior related to the sense of duty as a good citizen. It represents formal helping behavior in the form of volunteering or charitable giving from which benefits the community at large (Schuyt et al., 2004).

Given that social value orientation is not immune to change and is not a long-term, stable and unchanging personality trait, there is a good opportunity for its influence through external interventions (e.g. education), especially in the period of its formation, i.e. childhood and adolescence.

Multidirectional effect of happiness

The conceptualization of *happiness* emphasizes mainly its subjective nature, where the individual is the final judge (Myers & Diener, 1995). Although there are several concepts used to define happiness such as psychological well-being (Ryff & Singer, 1996) or self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the concept of *subjective well-being* is the most widespread. It refers to people's appraisals of their lives and entails both cognitive judgments of satisfaction and affective evaluations of moods and emotions (Diener, 1984). The subjective well-being consists of four interconnected but separable components, which include *life satisfaction* (global appraisal of life), *satisfaction with important areas of life* (work, partner, family and marriage, etc.), *positive affects* (preponderance of positive emotions and moods) and low levels of *negative affects* (unpleasant emotions and moods).

There is growing evidence that well-being and happiness have a broad impact on many aspects of prosocial values and behavior, volunteering and in the context of the above-mentioned supposedly also on the community sense. Speaking specifically, happy people (especially with high levels of positive affects) judge people they meet in a more positive way, are more interested in social interaction (Berry & Hansen, 1996). Positive affects also increase trust in others (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005) and helping behavior (Isen & Levin, 1972). Also, individuals with higher life satisfaction exhibit more generalized trust in others (Brehm & Rahn, 1997), which also predicts societal well-being.

In relation to the former statements and within the issue of community sense, it is also substantive that happier people have a greater tendency to volunteer work (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001) and they also exhibit an increase in ethical judgments (James & Chymis, 2004). Tov and Diener (2008) as well as Inglehart and Klingemann (2000) are of a similar opinion and they associate general well-being with democratic attitudes, higher generalized trust in society and volunteerism.

The relation between well-being and volunteering (community sense) is naturally reciprocal. As an important side effect we can mention the positive impact of volunteering on greater life satisfaction, self-esteem, physical health, longevity, decreased psychological distress, etc. (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001; Rietschling, 1998; Young & Glasgow, 1998).

The multidirectional effect of happiness and well-being on prosocial values, volunteering and the community sense can be demonstrated as follows (cf., Figure 3).

Given the particular similarity and duplication of most of the interactions and due to the close link between volunteering and the community sense, we can propose the following simplified model of the mutual impact of happiness

Figure 3. Incorporation of happiness into the model

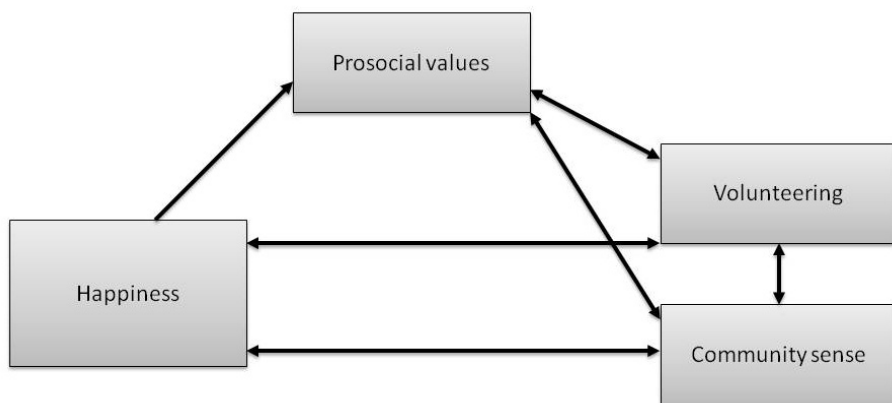
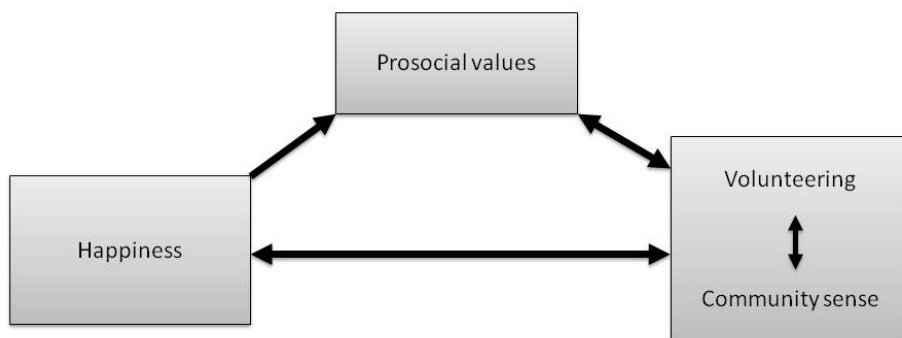


Figure 4. Simplified model of the mutual impact of happiness and prosocial values on volunteering and community sense



and pro-social values on the community sense (cf., Figure 4) that may represent a fundamental theoretical basis for the development of the community sense in our social and cultural conditions.

Conclusion

Although the relations depicted in this paper may seem natural and logical, the connection of all the described components (happiness, prosocial values, volun-

teering and the community sense) is quite an original act and has not yet received much attention in research or in practice. This theme yet bears great potential (especially in the context of changing society mentioned in the introduction). If we would like to summarize the main motives for support of volunteering and the development of the community sense, we have to emphasize:

- Positive economic effects on society and the state,
- Increase in civic awareness and participation in civic life,
- Desirable prosocial-oriented development of personality,
- Increase in life satisfaction and (in a wider context) the health of the individual,
- Etc.

It is obvious that it would be desirable to increase (or broaden) the interest in this domain especially in those who have the opportunity to actively influence the youth and their development, i.e., teachers (and parents as well). These efforts should focus on several areas. Within the development of prosocial values, the social value orientation, generalized trust, social responsibility and altruistic values are of the greatest importance. In terms of happiness, it is appropriate to focus on the support of its components, particularly life satisfaction and positive affect. Hand in hand with this, it is possible to focus on other aspects of a stable, resilient and positive personality, such as self-esteem, positive self-identity, self-efficacy, etc.

To achieve the objectives mentioned, it is of course necessary not only to encourage volunteering and the development of a volunteering-oriented personality, but also to initiate and support efforts to develop community thinking in society and to begin setting up the community units. Here is a space for individuals, civic and non-government institutions, as well as various government organizations and units (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, regional offices, city representatives, municipalities, etc.).

The paper has outlined the theoretical framework of the relationship between specific characteristics of the individual (happiness and prosocial values) and socially desirable values (volunteering and community sense). Given the potential and importance of this topic it will be given further attention in the GA ČR project and comparative studies including proposals of specific procedures and recommendations for the development of all the four variables will be described in subsequent articles.

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