

PERSONAL AGENCY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH VOLUNTARY WORK

Saskia WEBER GUISAN, Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (SFIVET), Switzerland

ABSTRACT

This article is based on a qualitative study carried out in French-speaking Switzerland, which aimed to better understand how personal agency could reveal, develop or strengthen itself in the context of volunteering. Results – based on analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with adult volunteers – show that volunteers were able to develop various soft skills. Their commitment also allowed them to develop their network and expertise on specific topics. Moreover, this volunteer experience usually contributed to strengthen the coherence between their ideals – or values – and their practices, thus contributing to identity reinforcement and to affirmation of personal ethics. The voluntary sphere can be considered as a place to develop personal agency and to stimulate subjective investment by offering the opportunity of being an actor and author of one's own life.

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a qualitative study carried out in French-speaking Switzerland as part of a master's thesis in educational sciences. This research, conducted from a sociological perspective, aimed to better understand how personal agency¹ could reveal, develop or strengthen itself in the context of volunteering (Weber Guisan, 2018). Starting from the premise that individuals are neither totally predetermined nor totally free, the question of their agency has to be raised. Agency could be described as the leeway between freedom and constraint(s), or, according to Evans (2016: 105), as the "ability to give direction to one's life"².

From a lifelong learning point of view, and more particularly in the approaches that focus on individual trajectories, the question of agency is central. Indeed, contemporary trajectories are less and less linear and instituted (Bessin, 2009). Since the 1980s, in a social and economic context marked by uncertainty and the erosion of institutional structures, individuals are enjoined to build their career and personal life on a moving basis. But what can individuals really achieve, with the resources and constraints that are theirs? Evans (2007: 17) proposes the concept of "bounded agency [which] is socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by environments and emphasizing internalized frames of reference as well as external actions". Evans (2016: 112) specifies also: "What limits us also contains affordances that allow us to think, feel and act".

In the field of adult education, it is important to question the capacity of individuals to orient their future, not only because it is a contemporary form of social injunction, but because this injunction is not always supported by an in-depth reflection on the possibility for individuals to really be actors of their own lives.

¹ In French, I used the expression « pouvoir d'agir » to speak about agency.

² Except for Evans (2007) whose text was already in English, I have translated all of the authors' quotations from French.

These numerous questions around a rather vague concept make a new question emerge, one of methodological order: how to observe agency in order to better understand it?

I chose volunteer work as exploration ground for agency. It is a social space where people engage on a voluntary and unpaid basis; so we can assume that it is a less constrained environment than paid work, for example. The voluntary sphere thus became the field of my reflection on agency, especially because several dimensions puzzled me: ... what motivates people to commit themselves without a salary? ... what are they looking for that they cannot find elsewhere? Finally, I asked myself to what extent voluntary work could be a way to deploy and develop one's agency.

This study is based on the trajectories of eight volunteers, aged from 37 to 63. Most of them were professionally active and involved in various types of volunteer activities (environmental protection, sport and politics, social and humanitarian care). Semi-structured interviews were conducted under a biographical approach in order to better understand whether, and how, volunteer practice contributes to the revelation, development and / or strengthening of personal agency among the interviewees. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. They were then coded with NVivo[®] software and analysed under a grounded theory approach.

The results presented below are empirically supported and are organized around three axes: reasons for commitment, scope of the contribution and learning through volunteering.

WHY VOLUNTEERING?

The compensatory value of volunteer work in relation to professional work

A first important point is the omnipresent link of paid work in the discourse of volunteers. In her studies on volunteering, Simonet-Cusset (2004) establishes a typology that situates how volunteer involvement is linked, in parallel or even in opposition, to professional involvement. Thus, voluntary commitment can be a substitute, an extension or compensation to a professional life or a lever for professional reorientation (ibid: 148).

The case of Ariane, 39, who was unable to complete her studies as an agricultural engineer and ended up in professional positions of no interest to her, is an illustration of the compensatory dimension of volunteering. By the age of 30, she was volunteering in a nature conservation organisation:

I was completely frustrated, [...] I didn't have my engineering degree, and then I was doing secretarial work that I had run away from a few years before [...] I needed some breathing space.³

For me it's two different worlds. There's the world of work where I do a job that I'm not interested in and don't believe in, and then there's the world of volunteer work where I do something that I'm interested in and believe in.

The voluntary sphere compensates for Ariane's professional life, which is not very fulfilling, and thus repairs a degraded image of herself. Volunteering acts as a restorative element and reinforces Ariane's identity and values. The agency defined in her professional sphere can deploy and embody in her voluntary sphere.

³ Quotes from volunteers are translated from oral French. It was not always possible to translate idioms exactly.

Recognition, self-definition and identity development

Still in connection with the professional sphere, it appears that volunteering can generate a form of recognition that is detached from paid work. Laure, 39, devotes herself almost entirely to her volunteer activities after having worked for many years in the pharmaceutical field. She now helps unemployed people in their job search:

When you stop working, then you realize that you define yourself a lot by that [i.e. professional life] and that it's interesting to detach yourself from it. I realized that I don't need professional recognition all over to get social recognition.

This is similar to Gilles, 38, historian and elected politician, for whom volunteering is a more democratic practice than paid work:

In the voluntary sector, you're no longer everything you are in the professional world; you're an individual in your own right who's committed to something. And finally, we don't care whether you're a truck driver, a lawyer or unemployed, that's not the important thing, the important thing is that you give time for a common cause.

Why is this related to agency? The question of recognition is eminently linked to identity. According to Dubar (1991), identity is never acquired once and for all, but is constantly constructed in a double transaction: identity for oneself and identity for others. This dynamic can be reinforced by voluntary commitment, particularly in the act of having a fresh look of oneself, of being surer about one's own desires, choices, values, potential and capacities. It is linked to the third form of recognition identified by Honneth (2013), self-esteem, which allows one to see oneself as a human being endowed with capabilities and qualities. We saw from Laure's words above that she must conquer an identity "outside work", and that she realizes that by emancipating herself from a restricted professional universe she can be seen differently through other's eyes, that she can have a social recognition beyond a professional one.

Embodying personal values

Many volunteers report a need for coherence between their practices and their values. Volunteering would be a form of embodying their values that would correspond to what Taylor (1994) calls the "ideal of authenticity", which is a form of fidelity to oneself, to express or accomplish one's true self, or, in other words, a self-fulfilment. It is a very personal dimension that responds to the individual's place in contemporary society - being oneself within the social space.

Julia, 52, therapist and volunteer within an organization that provides food to the most vulnerable people says:

It corresponds to my ideals... I do it because I'm convinced of it.

Ariane's discourse goes in the same line:

I had to do something in accordance with my convictions, and also use what I'd learned; I wanted to communicate what I knew.

This aspect is also part of a personal ethic. When Julia says, "I need to feel good about myself", she must put her own values first rather than those of a group.

CONTRIBUTION AND AGENCY

In order to understand this active part of volunteering, I have used the conceptualization of participation proposed by Zask (2011). Full participation results from an articulation between these three parts: taking part, contributing and receiving (benefiting).

This conceptualization seemed opportune to me to reflect on volunteering. Indeed, one voluntarily takes part in the project of an organization. Within it, one brings a personal part which contributes to the definition of the project and its objectives. Finally, resources (offered by the environment) are provided to enable this contribution and, thus, full participation. The question of contribution appears to me to be a key dimension of the agency.

This contributory dimension is reflected in Julia's comments. Her terms are all based on the idea of having an influence on her environment, seeing the result of her action or having the feeling that her action has contributed to shape the situation.

It's a real opportunity to make a difference, the possibility of being an efficient actor. The possibility of moving from a passive status to ... yes, that's really it, an active status, to be in a field that means something to you, that corresponds to you, [...] and also to know that you can change things that don't suit you. [...] I need to feel that I can make things happen.

In short, contribution is to bring a personal part to the common history.

Moving from a consumer status to an actor status

To go further on the subject of contribution, the example of Yves, 50, engineer and organiser of a race is very revealing. At the start, Yves was taking part in running races to undertake some sporting activity in order to feel healthy; everything was perfectly organized for him. Gradually, he felt the need to see how these sporting events work from the inside. He became involved in the timing of races, where his computer engineering skills were put to use.

As a rider, we arrive, we place ourselves on the starting line, we run, we shower, we have our rankings, so everything comes magically [...] I wanted to see a bit how it was going on the "other side of the scene".

After some time, Yves ended up being the lead organiser of running race. He thus moved from a consumer status (runner who takes part in a sporting event) to a status of actor who masters several aspects of this race and who can exert his influence on it.

I appreciate, that in everything I do, both professionally and sporty, and that's also why I committed myself a little more, to have a certain control over the activities in which I'm involved.

What Yves mentions appears in the studies on empowerment, particularly those of Le Bossé for whom individuals "try to become the authors and actors of the events that affect them rather than to undergo their consequences" (2003: 42).

VOLUNTEERING AS A LEARNING PROCESS CONTRIBUTING TO AGENCY

Learning outcomes from volunteering are often associated with informal learning, due to the fact that they are not acquired in a training context. Yet it would be wrong to think that these learning outcomes are "only" informal. Several volunteers mentioned continuing education courses that they were able to take in their associative framework. In the same way, volunteers integrate their associative environment with a wealth of professional and personal experiences, but also with outcomes from their formal training. They thus have the opportunity to remobilize, refresh, enrich and even re-interpret their formal knowledge. This fits particularly well with the proposal of Cristol and Muller who temper the idea of a strict distinction between formal and informal learning and rather

speak of "woven knowledge" (2013: 24) and of a "hybridization logic" (ibid: 23), which seems to correspond better to what is being achieved in the voluntary sphere.

Through volunteering,

- Ariane developed an expertise in group animation, undertook a lot of training related to environmental education and built a whole network around the protection of nature that she can use in other contexts
- Yves found a concrete ground in computer science after years spent in a managerial position that had kept him away from practice; this enabled him to remobilize latent capacities and gain credibility amongst his professional team
- Muriel and Julia developed communication skills by having to speak regularly in front of an audience or defend their cause / association to donors; Julia also acquired solid experience in the management of non-profit organizations
- Susana did a free training course in web design during her associative engagement; she was then able to implement it directly in the framework of her volunteer work
- Philippe benefited from his international experience in public health within the framework of an organization for cooperation and development; this enabled him to remobilize, update and enrich his professional expertise
- Gilles, through his political commitment to his commune, had to take responsibility for cases on topics unknown to him, and in this way developed his expertise on specific subjects, such as land use planning
- Laure is now putting into practice what she has learnt in her Human Resources certificate with groups in vulnerable situations; she now knows the official employment and placement structures of her city well

Their commitment allowed them to develop skills in group facilitation, in computer science, in communication, in management, to acquire expertise in specific topics and to develop their networks. These achievements contribute to the development of agency, because these individuals benefit from additional resources that they can use for their own project.

This idea of continuity can be found in the words of Mayen for whom "experience is creative only if it already bears the seeds of the development of future experiences; in other words, if it opens ways to the growth and renewal of experience" (2008: 64). These developments of experiences or resources make it possible to "broaden the scope of possible actions" (Clot & Simonet, 2015: 46) and thus to contribute to the autonomy of individuals. According to Cristol and Muller (2013: 42), "the individual shows through his informal learning the signs of autonomy, the latter being defined as self-regulation". This way, "the seizure of power by oneself and for oneself on one's learning" is a transformation and emancipation (ibid: 43). Therefore, a reinforcement of control over oneself by oneself contributes to an emancipation of control over oneself by others, and this is one of the core characteristics of personal agency definition.

Moreover, these volunteer experiences have strengthened the coherence between the ideals - or values - of these individuals and their practices, thus contributing to their identity reinforcement and to affirmation of their personal ethics.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would associate volunteers' itineraries with the definition of capabilities

given by Sen (2010): to be and to do what one values; or, in other words, the possibility of choosing the life you wish to lead. It is about considering values in a broad sense. Indeed, Sen insists on taking into account not only the individual's affordances, but also one's choices, preferences and values in assessing capabilities.

We have seen how voluntary work can develop personal agency, notably in connection with the professional sphere, without possibilities of compensation or reparation. These opportunities allow personal fulfilment and recognition outside paid work.

Volunteering further allows coherence between actions and values, which seems to meet the need for a personal ethics or an important subjective investment that we often observe today. This process is accompanied by a contributory dimension that allows individuals to forge their own historicity (Zask, 2011) by modifying the common.

Thus, among the volunteers interviewed in this study, it is possible to observe personal agency in transformation:

- Susana feels stronger in her volunteer sphere than in the professional one. It is then a revealed agency.
- Ariane and Julia commit to voluntary work in order to implement values that they do not have the opportunity to put into effect in their professional activity; Muriel and Laure provide themselves with the means, notably through their voluntary commitment, to reorient themselves professionally. This is both revealed and developed agency.
- Philippe and Gilles, through their civic commitment, further reinforce values built up during their childhood or youth as well as interests that they already pay attention to in their professional lives; and, finally, Yves finds, through his volunteer commitment, an additional way to take control of several aspects of his life. Their agency is thus strengthened.

If one considers agency as the ability to direct one's life according to one's values and choices, then the voluntary sphere concentrates lots of opportunities to develop it. Volunteering offers possibilities of being an actor, and in this way can be a place for subjective investment, which corresponds to a possible response of the individual to the demands of contemporary society, like being entrepreneurial, active and author of one's own life.

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