

Youth and community service

A review of U.S. research, a theoretical perspective, and implications for policy in Germany

James Youniss · Heinz Reinders

Abstract: We discuss findings and issues regarding community service by youth in the United States, for example: Is school-based required service as effective as voluntary service, and if increasing numbers of youth are doing service, why has political engagement not increased? We next present a theory proposing that certain kinds of service can contribute to the development of social identity. Such service would be challenging, bring youth into direct contact with the strange “other,” and engage youth with organizations which represent moral and political traditions. We conclude with speculations on ways community service might benefit identity development in German youth and help to resolve tensions in contemporary German society.

Keywords: Civic engagement · Community service · Identity development · Volunteerism · Youth service

Jugend und gemeinschaftliches Engagement – Ein Überblick zur US-amerikanischen Forschung, eine theoretische Perspektive und Implikationen für die Politik in Deutschland

Zusammenfassung: Wir diskutieren Forschungsergebnisse und Folgerungen hinsichtlich gemeinschaftsförderlichem Engagement von Jugendlichen in den USA, z.B. die Frage, ob Dienste, die die Schulen vorschreiben so wirksam sind wie freiwilliges Engagement, oder die Frage, warum die zunehmende Zahl von Jugendlichen, die Dienste leistet, nicht zu einem zunehmenden politischen Engagement führt. Als nächstes schlagen wir eine Theorie vor, derzufolge bestimmte Dienste zu einer Entwicklung der sozialen Identität von Jugendlichen beitragen können. Solche Dienste stellen eine Herausforderung dar, indem sie Jugendliche mit fremdartigen „Anderen“ zusammenbringen, und dies im Rahmen von Organisationen, die moralische und politische Traditionen repräsentieren. Wir schließen mit Spekulationen über Wege, wie freiwilliges Engagement möglicherweise der Identitätsentwicklung deutscher Jugendlicher zugutekommen und helfen könnte, Spannungen in der gegenwärtigen deutschen Gesellschaft zu lösen.

Published online: 13.05.2010

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Schlüsselwörter: Ziviles Engagement · Kommunale Dienste · Identitätsentwicklung
Jugendlicher · Freiwilliges Engagement · Jugenddienste

1 Introduction

This paper is composed of three parts. First, we present a context for viewing community service and volunteerism in the United States. We offer a brief history, a review of selected research, and a discussion of issues which have driven research. Second, we present empirical evidence on effects of service participation in samples of high school students in the United States and Germany. And third, we sketch a theory which is based on our research over the past 15 years. This work was designed to identify conditions which make school-initiated service effective in promoting what we have called *civic identity*, a sense that one belongs and can contribute to one's community (Yates and Youniss 1999; Youniss and Yates 1997). We will summarize the major points which comprise this position.

2 Context

The United States has a long history of community service and volunteerism. In his travels through the United States' young democracy in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville noted the breadth of non-government, voluntary citizen associations which provided services freely and helped to build cohesion within local communities. This tradition continued through the nineteenth century as new communities arose with westward expansion and as new immigrant groups formed mutual aid societies in large urban centers. The ethos of service continues today, even as government programs offer health and welfare services through local non-profit organizations which perform those services using volunteers. For example, AmeriCorps, a large government program which offers service opportunities and payment toward college for youth, uses the non-profit sector for the actual delivery of service. In one community, AmeriCorps members might work with a local environmental group, whereas in another community members might work for an organization which trains at-risk youth for employment, and in still another, members might work with an adult literacy program for poor single mothers (for further information see <http://www.americorps.gov>).

During the past 30 years, a research literature has built up around the practice, in part, to determine how to make service more effective, but also to determine whether its outcomes are commensurate with its costs. Funding comes from government agencies and philanthropic foundations, both of which need to justify allocation of resources to the public and boards of directors. This research has taught us much about the kinds of persons who are most likely to do service, the benefits which derive to those who do service as well as for the recipients, and the conditions which are most likely to lead to positive effects (see Musick and Wilson 2008, for a thorough review). Research on possible impacts of service in Germany is relatively new¹ so in the spirit of sound science, it makes sense to look to studies in the United States for leads as the idea of service emerges

in Germany (Sliwka et al. 2006). This may be especially useful for the study of service by youth which has been the focus of numerous studies, programs, and social policy (Torney-Purta et al. 2001). Thus, the present paper is written for a German audience, but covers mainly research in the United States.

There are good reasons to be cautious about the transfer of knowledge from the United States to other places, however. The historical emergence of service, the institutional frameworks, and the role of youth in larger society may not allow simple cross-country generalizations. For instance, service in some countries denotes time spent in the military as a mandatory rite of passage into adult citizenship, whereas in other places it has a diffuse aim of social cohesiveness (see Perold et al. 2003; Yates and Youniss 1999). These differences demonstrate the complex meaning of service which is contingent on government structures, philanthropic and religious traditions, and the very notion of citizenship. For example, in the U.S., many high schools require their students to do service for credit in order to graduate. To wit, the state of Maryland requires service during the high school years and the city of New York has just mandated that service becomes part of education in all middle and high schools. Such policies seem less likely to be implemented in western European nations where social services are to a greater degree the province of the state's welfare system and not left to individuals or non-government institutions.

At the same time, there are other aspects of service which might be shared in common across countries. In any culture or nation, there are always people with needs whom youth with time and talent, can serve. Since government agencies cannot attend to all needs, individuals or non-governmental organizations may step in to provide assistance. Second, all youth strive for an identity which anchors them in society. Hannah Arendt has called this *specificity* to emphasize the importance of place, membership, and participation to personhood and citizen rights (e.g., Gottsegen 1994). Hence, it seems plausible to assume that the direct contact with people in need might make a contribution to young people's identity development, irrespective of institutional, cultural or political differences. Third, in any society, there are institutions such as churches whose mission includes helping others by meeting needs and shaping the character of youth. Service fits both of these functions. If similarities are evident, they may be found on the youth' individual level and in the psychological processes which mediate identity development.

3 The rise in youth service in the 1980s

The Reagan presidency (1980–1988) made direct impacts on the tradition of service in the United States. Reagan's administration encouraged a broad effort to privatize risk and shift services from government programs to the private sector. With regard to risk, for example, coverage of health care and old age pensions was shifted from employers to individuals who had to acquire health care policies through private insurers and provide for old age security with individual investment accounts (Hacker 2006). Privatization occurred simultaneously as government administration of, for example, food coupons for the poor, was shifted to the non- and for-profit sectors (Salamon 2003). These well-known actions on behalf of neoconservative and market ideologies were designed to remove the government from the responsibility and delivery of services. Reagan was succeeded in

the presidency by George H. W. Bush (1988–1992) who in his election campaign used the image of “a thousand points of light” to symbolize the shift in services from government to the shoulders of individual private citizens.

The Reagan presidency also mounted a public relations attack on youth who were pictured as morally deficient. Funding was targeted to intervention programs aimed at the social problems of teenage pregnancy, violence, drug use, and academic failure. Although data did not necessarily support this general indictment, the image of morally suspect youth took hold in the public’s mind. To counter this negative image, heads of a few elite universities inaugurated a “Campus Compact” which encouraged students to do service in the hope that that the public would come to see another more positive side of youth. From a small start in 1985, Campus Compact grew continuously so that today it has chapters on over 1,000 campuses nationwide (for further information see <http://www.compact.org>).

This movement had impact far beyond college campuses. As the “Echo Baby Boomer” cohort grew in size, its numbers created competition for admission to the colleges of choice. In order to gain advantage, high school students and their parents adopted a strategy of enhancing applicants’ credentials. Capitalizing on higher education’s interest in service, high school students logged hours of service to improve their resumes (Friedland and Morimoto 2005). In turn, as students took this approach, high schools began offering service opportunities with many choosing to make a service a requirement for graduation. In addition to the pull from colleges, expansion of service was driven by the rationale that service in coordination with classes, could help to motivate students by making learning more real and relevant (Furco and Billig 2002). These factors led to an increase in the number of high-school based service programs between 1990 to 2005 (Planty and Regnier 2004). Recent data indicate that over 80% of entering college freshmen have done service during the previous year (Pryor et al. 2007). Of high school seniors, about 25 to 30% have done service monthly or more frequently and another 45 or so percent have done service occasionally (Monitoring the Future, for further information see <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org>). This leaves only a small minority who have done no service at all.

There is another interpretation of this phenomenon. The “1960s” witnessed the coming of age of the Baby Boomers and the rise of numerous social movements pertaining to civil rights, anti-war, feminism, nuclear disarmament, environmental consciousness, free speech, and more. Estimates of the number of youth who participated in these movements are indefinite. Nevertheless, young people’s activism had a decided impact by stirring up debate on all sorts of social issues. Youth not only participated in large demonstrations and public confrontations with authorities but in the process, they altered norms with regard to dress, use of drugs, sexuality outside of marriage, tastes in music and food, and codes for public language. These changes together created inter-generational and social class tensions within society that still resonate today.

It would difficult to prove, but it is plausible to suggest that part of the recent push for service may have been, in part, a tactic to tame activism by diverting students away from political engagement. It has been estimated that less than 5% of the service done by youth involves political activities. The remainder and vast majority, then, is focused on such things as tutoring, cleaning the environment, helping the homeless, and the like.

The distinction between political activism and the direct delivery of service to others, has only recently reached the consciousness of a larger audience (e.g. Bickford and Reynolds 2002; Gibson 2006; Musick and Wilson 2008). Some scholars believe service should provide students with experiences in meeting the “other” so that they see life beyond their own privileged situation. Other scholars argue that service ought to merge with activism so that students would not just observe social problems, but seek to understand and rectify their structural bases. The distinction can be seen, for instance, in a contrast between supplying meals to homeless people and dealing with the causes of homelessness by lobbying for policies that would produce affordable housing.

This distinction hangs diffusely like a cloud over the service movement and there is no right or wrong answer to it. It is clear, however, that political activism at the public high school level is not a simple or practical option. The bringing of controversial issues into the classroom is not an easy task for teachers or administrators. For decades, the nation has been sharply polarized on social issues which have given rise to ideological extremes. In light of this fact, any teacher’s safest option is to avoid contentious issues in order not to incur complaints from parents or legislators (Hess 2009). On the other hand, service in the name of the American spirit of helping people in need, requires no further justification. Who can be against helping less fortunate others and having more privileged students share their advantages with those in need?

4 The structure and approaches to service

Musick and Wilson (2008) have provided an informative review of approaches to the study of volunteerism and service. They report on the typical characteristics of people who do service, the kinds of service usually done, and how service is organized. As to characteristics, the most likely volunteer is white, highly educated, middle income or higher, owns a home, is a member of organizations, attends church, and if middle age, has children. These characteristics recur from study to study and resemble those found in adults who are active politically (Verba et al. 1995). What is not clear is why this pattern is associated with service or political participation. Any number of hypotheses seem reasonable; for instance, people from higher social classes may have more available time, may be more connected to their communities, and, thus, have more opportunities to volunteer.

The grounds for service are less clear in youth, mainly because the near universality of school modulates individual and sociological differences. For example, the state of Maryland requires that all high school students do certified service before they graduate. This mandate applies to schools in every city and rural community as well as all neighborhoods, both wealthy and poor. Nevertheless, at the national level, government surveys indicate that fewer youth from economically disadvantaged areas have done service than have youth from more affluent areas (e.g. Spring et al. 2007). The most likely factor which differentiates these rates is opportunity or recruitment, which is similar to the factor that seems to drive adult service. These opportunities originate in differences among schools (Kahne and Middaugh 2009) and presumably in the geographic distribution of sponsoring organizations.

Little insight is gained by looking at the kinds of service that youth typically do. Data from recent surveys are consistent in showing that youth tutor classmates, clean the environment, visit the elderly, do clerical work, raise money for charities, collect clothes or food, counsel peers, and work at soup kitchens. What students do depends largely on their age and availability of service opportunities. Only some small proportion of service is initiated solely by students, most is non-political in nature, and much service is done at some distance from the eventual recipient or beneficiary. For example, youth were encouraged to raise money and collect clothes for the victims of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana and Mississippi. The effort was funneled through relief organizations and very few youth ever came face-to-face with the victims of the disaster or the devastated areas.

Musick and Wilson (2008) point out that although the popular strain of thinking associates service with individual personality traits, for instance, empathy, the more logical entry to service is through recruitment and opportunity. Few individuals wake up in the morning and say to themselves, "I feel altruistic, so I think I'll do service today." The more likely path to service is arranged through family, friends, broader networks, or organizational membership. It is well-established that the doing of service by one's friends or family members, is a reliable predictor of youth's service. In addition, membership in a voluntary organization is a reliable predictor of youth's service. These facts can be understood more clearly by looking at the general ecology of service.

Services, such as providing food, safety, shelter, counseling, and the like, are being delivered 7 days a week, 24 hours each day through government agencies and non-profit organizations. Sites at which services are delivered are typically staffed by a small group of paid professionals who rely on volunteers to help them meet the needs of recipient clients. For example, at a soup kitchen, the professional staff arranges the delivery and preparation of food as well as prescribing a protocol for serving the clients. Volunteers are enlisted to prepare, serve, and clean up after meals. Allahyari (2000) illustrates this structure by describing the detailed operations of two soup kitchens in inner-city Sacramento, CA, one run by the Catholic Workers and the other by the Salvation Army. The staffs recruit and manage volunteers from churches, retirement homes, and civic associations. These volunteers may live in the suburbs but are brought to the sites via connections between the organizations to which they belong and the sponsors of the soup kitchens. It follows that there are two main ways in which a youth may arrive at a site. Either an individual youth belongs directly to the sponsoring organization or the youth belongs to an organization which is connected to the sponsoring organization.

Musick and Wilson's (2008) review indicates that "... volunteers ... rarely show up on their own, but come with friends, families, classmates, and fellow members of their civic organization, church, or their workplace's community service group" (p. 268). In the United States, religious schools and congregations provide a large proportion of sponsoring sites and associated volunteers. An ethos of service may arise from deep seated community norms (Eckstein 2001). It may also be based on religious principles which promote helping as a religious act as well as because churches possess human, material, and cognitive resources which enable services to be administered reliably in a professional manner. According to a recent survey of American congregations, Chaves and Tsitsos (2001) reported that a significant proportion is engaged in social service projects which help to improve neighborhoods.

When the role of organizations is understood, then focus on psychological characteristics which precipitate service becomes almost secondary. Consider studies which have hypothesized that youth's quest for autonomy should make them averse to mandatory service. If this were true, then required service might be counter-productive (see Stukas et al. 1999). But this argument might be moot, given the predictive power of organizational membership and affiliation. Three of our studies have reinforced the point. Youniss and Yates (1997) found that about one-half the students required to do service in a religion class on social justice, showed positive change during the year in coming to focus on the conditions which lead to homelessness. Metz and Youniss (2005) found that many public high school students felt it was wrong for the high school to require service. However, once students did service, they showed the same benefits as their classmates who were prone to do service without the requirement. Hart et al. (2007) found that students who were required to do service in high school, were more likely to vote 8 years later than their peers who did no service. Apparently, the experience of doing service produced effects which overrode initial motivation and students' uninformed anticipation of what might occur.

5 Impact of service

This area of study also has produced mixed results. The major reason seems to be that "service" has not been always defined in commensurate relationship to expected outcomes. The term service covers a wide array of possible activities which include at one extreme, a single day's effort, say, in cleaning a park, and at the other extreme, weekly stints at a teenage crisis center. As stated already, typical kinds of service are tutoring one's classmates, visiting a residence for the elderly with one's classmates, cleaning the environment, tutoring disadvantaged youth, serving food, collecting clothes or food for needy people, doing clerical work for a non-profit institution, or participating in events which raise money for causes, for instance, group-walking to raise funds for cancer research. In addition to variety of types, service varies in frequency; it may be occasionally, once per month, or on a regular weekly basis.

It should be obvious that with this variety in type and frequency, there is no simple answer to the question of the kind of impact service might have. Some advocates of service have not been clear enough in correlating what is actually done with the benefits that might result. For example, it seems to be assumed that "helping others" would lead, in itself, to "civic engagement." One can readily see the fallacy in such a presumption. For instance, if tutoring constitutes service and the impact is supposed to be voting, there is no obvious relation between the former and the latter. It should not be surprising, then, that empirical evidence for a relationship between service and political engagement is lacking. The same critique applies to the hypothesis that service done through school classes, called service learning (e.g. Furco and Billig 2002), should motivate academic achievement. Whereas there is some evidence that such a relationship may prevail, the hypothesis has been difficult to verify (e.g. Billig et al 2005). Perhaps the major lesson to be learned is that gains depend on broad factors such as the organizational framework of service and the targeted goal.

This generalization is clarified by further considerations. Again, most service is sponsored and organized by established non-profit institutions. They offer service as part of their

defining purpose, for example, the Red Cross offers health services for people in need. Volunteers who then work under auspices of these organizations are exposed to the sponsors' purpose or ideology and are likely to pick it up as the rationale for the actions. This is the gist of the thesis of Piliavin et al. (2002) that participation in a program of service helps volunteers to adopt the identity of the sponsor. For instance, donating blood at Red Cross facility, leads volunteers to view themselves as "Red Cross donors," or people who willingly give their blood to anonymous others who need it. The argument may seem circular, but it is sensible and supported by data. For example, once people serve, they may begin to see themselves as empathic with their behavior leading to the conclusion, rather than vice versa (Penner 2002; see Reinders and Youniss 2006, for a confirmation of Penner's proposal).

This logic is particularly important when studying youth. In view of findings reported by Metz and Youniss (2005) or Youniss and Yates (1997), we can ask how adolescents could possibly know the way service would affect them until they actually experienced it? For example, in the latter study, in their initial visits to a soup kitchen, adolescents expected homeless people to be mean, dirty, not smart, lazy, and uneducated. But as the students repeatedly returned to the kitchen during the year, they got to know real homeless people and their perceptions changed. They began to see "the homeless" as real people who were similar to their parents or neighbors, except that homeless people might have lost their jobs or become drug addicted while in the military in Vietnam. By working regularly at the kitchen, students came to see many sides of homelessness; for instance, some homeless people were mentally distressed, others were addicted, and still others were unable to hold a job. This variety prodded students to reflect on their own views of homelessness and on causes and solutions for it, for example, raising questions about the provision of mental health services, why they were not adequately provided, and what might be achieved with stronger programs.

In support of Piliavin et al. (2002) and Penner (2002), as the year wore on, adolescents began to see themselves in a new light. Some of them saw their activity as direct enactment of Christian social justice as it was prescribed in the social justice class. Others began to project themselves as future government workers who would deal with the causes of homeless such as lack of affordable housing, inadequate education, or the absence of job re-training. These insights illustrate the role of identity as young people began to view themselves and their actions as extensions of the organizations which sponsored and framed their service. In this particular case, students took on the identity of people acting on behalf of Christian social justice.

One can ask rightfully, is such an identity a momentary notion or does it have lasting power? We cannot answer for this particular case whether or not students' projections into the future were enduring. But there is extensive evidence that collective participation in challenging forms of service which have clear moral causes and are organized accordingly, does in fact have lasting impact on identity. We refer here to an array of studies of youth who participated in civil rights, anti-war, pro-environment, feminist, and other movements (see e.g. Youniss et al. 1997). Contrary to popular opinion that youth activists are destined to become comfort-seeking middle age conservatives, the data indicate that youth activists of the 1960 s, tended to remain politically engaged and morally invested through their adult lives into the 1980s and 1990s (Jennings 2002). Of course, such a

result is not the product of just any service. But when service has clear moral cause, is supported by organizational resources, and is oriented to political change, this result is reliable.

6 Theoretical framework to explain outcomes of service

It was already proposed that outcomes from the doing of service depend on the type of service and its organizational structure. It is sometimes difficult to get this point across because many people prefer to view service as arising from individual factors such as motivation or empathy. But our results over the past 15 years lead us to think about service in terms of its structure which can be defined by its sponsors and the framework they supply. Frameworks vary widely across the spectrum in which service is ordinarily done. Schools often couch service in terms of responsibility and self-sacrifice. Churches often use the frame of social justice. Advocacy groups use policy goals such as conserving the environment or reforming schools. And various non-profit organizations are devoted to specific causes such as providing mental health services or pre-natal care to unwed mothers.

From our perspective, these frameworks provide potential nourishment for youth's developing identities because they offer young people opportunities to envision themselves as representatives of the sponsoring organization. This could mean, "Red Cross blood donor," "an activist on behalf of the Jewish social justice tradition," or "pro-labor, anti-sweat shop protestor." In doing service under one of these auspices, young people gain the opportunity to experience themselves as acting on behalf of an organization's rationale or ideology. Service then becomes an instance of acting out a system of meaning and exploring an identity within that system. Insofar as there is an essential social side to identity, service can provide the developing youth with valuable substance. It is a strange conceit of some psychological theories that each youth must create an identity afresh by choosing pieces from a vast array through prodigious use of self-reflection. Why must this be so when systems of meaning abound around us, systems which have clear histories and provide visions of the ideal future? It seems more reasonable to propose that construction of identity can build on existing structures which afford youth transcendent meaning which comes with a collective history of experience and speaks to a hopeful future.

This proposal does not relieve the individual of the task of constructing identity. Individuals cannot simply copy a ready-made identity and put it on like a suit or dress, but must re-construct what they are given by making material relevant and fitting to present circumstances. This requires effort and service provides an opportunity for testing the relevance of a system's meaning through participation in contemporary society. Accommodation to present realities allows individuals to assess a system of meaning and the roles they might play in it. To paraphrase the nineteenth century philosopher, John Stewart Mill, one cannot learn how to be a democratic citizen by reading, any more than one learn how to ride a horse by reading. Learning the meaning of political or moral systems requires putting them into practice.

Our perspective has a certain pertinence to youth development today. Youth have an abundance of access to virtual meaning systems, say, via the internet, but they have lim-

ited opportunities for putting them into practice. In economically advanced societies, there is a large gap between youth who spend time in school, and the professional management of social functions. Service provides an entry point which allows young people to participate in these functions, to do it collectively, and to do it within a disciplined or institutional framework. This may be seen as valuable antidote to egocentrism because in partaking in a system, individuals take stands which open them to public scrutiny. The possibility is enhanced when the stands are political because any position is apt to come into competition with other views and interests. It is easy to construct views in private and support them by finding others which are in agreement. But once a political stance is taken overtly, one potentially enters a new domain where multiple views begin to interact. There is, then, a process of social give-and-take which accompanies service that is political. It potentially blends realism and idealism together in annealing the identity process (Kirshner 2009; Youniss 2009).

7 Empirical evidence from the US and Germany

We have taken the position that forming a social identity involves becoming a member of a specific place and culture and that this step is near to a psychological universal. This may be done implicitly and unselfconsciously, or may be deliberate and effortful. Insofar as this is a useful proposition, service has a valuable role to play in the identity process. Service brings youth out of a virtual and private world by having them act in public spaces for political, religious, or some other purpose. Youth then have an opportunity to partake with others in a particular tradition and to be challenged by others who represent different stances. This gives individuals two chances for feedback to clarify identity, one from supporters and another from critics. Both help to locate young people within time and place, giving them a specific civic context for membership.

We recognize that German and the United States offer different cultural meanings for service as was stated in our introduction. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to explore whether the role of service in identity development might be similar in the two cultures. This question was initially raised by Hofer (1999) who used the framework offered by Youniss and Yates (1997) for assessing the role played by service in identity. In brief, Youniss and Yates reported that in doing service at a soup kitchen over a 9-month span, adolescents showed progressive steps in the identity process. First, they came to see the homeless people they served as ordinary human beings who shared feelings and hopes similar to their own. Youth initially perceived homeless people as the proverbial "other," strangers with special characteristics, e.g., mentally imbalanced, lazy, and slovenly. But on repeated encounters with them at the kitchen, youth realized that homeless people were simply *people*, albeit people with problems which brought them to their present state.

Second, having this insight, adolescents then began to reflect on their own state and to recognize that, compared with the homeless they served, they themselves were relatively well-off. They had ready access to food and shelter, and had loving parents who care for them and secure their safety. For some of the youth, this appeared to be the first occasion in which they began to view themselves from a third-person perspective which jogged

them out of their taken-for-granted state. As some youth put it, “I too, could be homeless or without a job if I did not take my own education seriously.”

And third, youth began to think about homelessness in political and moral terms. Why is there homelessness in wealthy communities? Who is responsible for providing affordable housing? Shouldn’t drug rehabilitation be widely available for those in need? What kind of policy allows elderly and feeble adults to live on the streets rather than staying in secure, warm places? Why doesn’t the local government provide job re-training when businesses leave a city and create large-scale unemployment? The pertinence of these questions was enhanced by the fact that these youth lived in Washington, DC, the seat of the nation’s wealth and power.

Hofer looked at these three steps in the identity process by studying 38 German youth who did service in the Youth Fire Police and Red Cross, comparing them with age mates who did no service. Results mirrored those of the youth’s American counterparts. German youth expressed insight into “others” who differed from them. For example, when they confronted right-extremist youth, they began talking with them and discovered that their original expectations had to be modified to accommodate to the actual people they met. At another level, these youth used their exposure to unfamiliar others to reflect seriously on their own behavior and status. For instance, they began to see the folly of wanting to wear clothes with popular labels. And at another level, youth reflected on the deeper sources of the problems with which they were dealing. For example, they saw consumerism and materialism as the source of problems in society and they questioned value systems behind warps in society’s functioning. Thus, despite the very different contexts for service in the U.S. and Germany, service had similar effects in promoting the same three steps in the identity process in youth from both cultures.

In another assessment of the generality of developmental processes sparked by service, we attempted to test aspects of a more formal model that was initially reported by Reinders and Youniss (2006). The elements of the model are shown in Fig. 1.

Reading from left to right, we propose that challenging service, which entails meeting the other through direct service contact, can lead, through a series of steps, toward

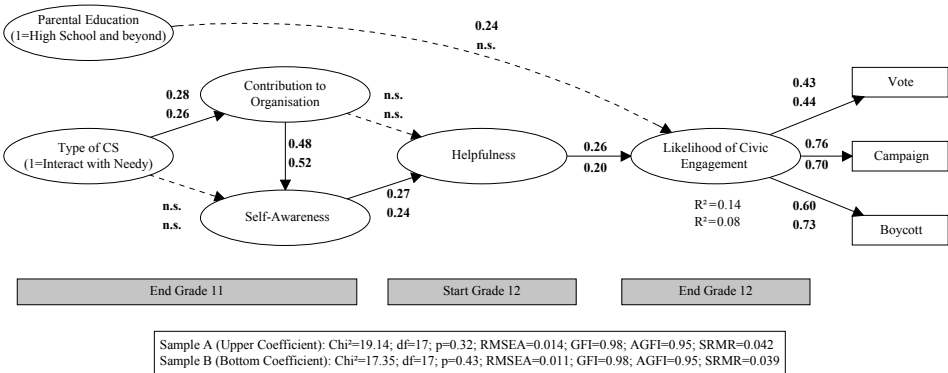


Fig. 1: Empirical models to predict the likelihood of civic engagement at the end of grade 12 in two US-samples (Reinders and Youniss 2006). All coefficients are significant at the 5%-level. n.s.—Not significant

advances in forming identity as part of civic time and place. The model was constructed for American adolescents who did service over an extended, 2-year period as a requirement of their high school curriculum.

We proposed that challenging service can lead to the perception that one’s activities have contributed to advancing the goals of the sponsoring organization. In turn, this perception helps adolescents to perceive themselves as efficacious agents in society. According to the empirical evidence, the former step of helping an organization precedes and does not follow from the latter step of perceiving the self as agentic.

The next step in the model deals with further prosocial behavior and attitudes which we measured with a behavioral check list several months after the challenging service was done. Adolescents whose challenging service was seen as a contribution to sponsoring organizations, then viewed themselves as effective social agents and, 3 months later, self-reported that they had performed acts of helping toward other strangers (not those served) whom they found in need.

The last step in the model was assessed several months thereafter as youth were asked how likely they would be to volunteer in the future and vote when they later became eligible. We intended these items to reflect adolescents’ sense of civic identity, or of being a contributing member to society.

This model was tested and replicated with representative data from two Shell-Youth Studies (Fischer et al. 2000; Deutsche Shell 2002) and again with another sample of German youth (see Fig. 2). Analyses of the Shell-Youth Studies showed that adolescents with service which is likely to be done with direct contact to people in state of need scored higher on scales of civic responsibility and political interest (Reinders and Youniss 2005). In addition, data showed that young people with frequent service agreed more to items which stated that civic engagement played an important role in their lives.

Yet, this reanalysis left the question of whether the psychological process, moderated by the feeling of making a contribution and changed self-awareness, might be comparable to the one found in the US study. Hence, another study with German adolescents (N=1,495) was conducted using the same instruments as with the U.S. sample.² We found

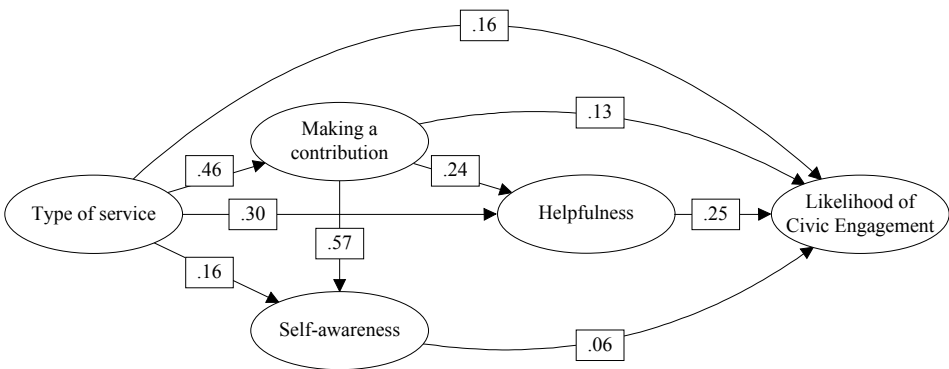


Fig. 2: Empirical model 2 to predict the likelihood of civic engagement in a cross-sectional sample of German students (Reinders 2005)

some similarities, although age and socio-demographic composition were not comparable (see Fig. 2).

Again, type of service predicted the sense of making a contribution and level of self-awareness. The youth who believed they contributed to a project, also showed higher scores on helpfulness and subsequently on future civic engagement. Since self-awareness in the German sample directly influenced the likelihood of civic engagement, we assume that both perceived effectiveness and self-awareness are important but differ in the direct or indirect role they played in developing a civic identity. In summary, the results from samples in both countries indicate that psychological processes follow comparable patterns. If and how organizational structures and societal emphasis on community service affect this process in different countries is yet unknown. Still, empirical evidence so far supports the possibility that certain kinds of community service promote the development of civic identity in Germany and the U.S.

8 Conclusion: implications for policy

Recently, scholars in Germany have begun to address the role that service might play in personal-psychological development as well as in the larger sphere of civic identity (Hofer 1999; Dux et al. 2008; Krettenauer and Gudulas 2003). We hope that the present article contributes positively to this discussion by offering evidence, cautions, and opportunities based on studies done with youth in the United States. As just noted, there are data to support the proposition that aspects of the identity process stimulated by service in American youth, have been found in German youth of comparable age. So, despite the different contexts for service in the two nations, there are grounds for suggesting a common role for service as it pertains to the identity process.

Hofer (1999) citing Beck (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001) and others, notes the complex social system in which adolescents find themselves today. They face splits between their supportive families and unforgiving institutions which function by competitive market principles. They also face splits among value systems, say, between democratic values of mutual respect and political battles in which various sides demean and discount one another. Miller-Idriss (2006) points to the additional problem whereby schools promote democratic values but students see around them the workings of prejudice and ethnic suspicion. Underlying this cauldron is a society whose common culture is stressed by demographic pressures of low fertility and persistent immigration which leads to cultural diversity and diffusion (e.g. Laqueur 2007).

If this challenging assessment is even partially accurate, German youth are living in a time when discernment of the cultural possibilities is of utmost importance. There is a tendency to think that with access to the internet, youth can know all that lies before them to a degree not possible before, even 30 years ago. But we propose that virtual knowing is no substitute for meeting the reality experientially and coming to know who one is and can be in relationship to others who share the same space but hold different outlooks. Service is not the only means for coming to know and understand “the other,” but it is an effective way because it offers opportunities to learn about the other and self via direct, but non-confrontational interaction.

About 20 years ago, Germany had the opportunity to employ youth in a society-building enterprise when the socialistic system in the East was suddenly incorporated into the democratic and capitalistic West. By promoting social welfare programs at that time, government and civil society institutions eased reunification. Yet, one might argue that an opportunity for East and West to get to know one another was missed because youth from the East and West were not recruited as volunteers to serve in this effort.

A similar opportunity exists today because of the divisions between a large aging and a small youth population, and between German and immigrant youth. If young people were allowed and encouraged to address social needs by serving others, the chances to forge common German identities might be enhanced and, in the sense of Arendt's specificity, empowered membership might arise to counter alienation.

We end by encouraging that more research ought to be conducted on service in Germany. There are many questions to be resolved before service programs designed for the German context and required for German youth, can be justified. Either implementation or expansion would additionally face the problem of that service is less prominent in Germany, and thus more culturally foreign, than in many other countries (Tourney-Purta et al. 2001). Further, because of the structure of the school system, it would take great effort to incorporate the doing of service into the curriculum and everyday German school life (Sliwka 2006). Nevertheless, it is of major interest to find a clear rationale and specify the conditions under which service would be helpful to meet people's needs, to promote students' civic development, and to build cohesion within contemporary German society. Serious studies of service are essential if a compelling case is to be made for the development of service programs and their potential support of educational practice and civic coherence. Because so much is at stake and because initial results are promising, we believe a new research effort is clearly justified.

Endnotes

- 1 For an extensive review on German research see Reinders 2009.
- 2 The German sample consists of 12- to 17-year old adolescents from all school tracks and an equal gender distribution. For measure characteristics and further details see Reinders (2005) and Reinders and Youniss (2006)

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