

NEW METHODS TO EVALUATE VOLUNTARY EXPERIENCES

This paper is focused on the methods of qualitative research that might be used for a long and short-term evaluation of voluntary experiences of young people across Europe. It is other than questionnaire approaches that allow verification and estimation of an impact of voluntary experience on a volunteer, hosting and home communities and the European society at larger scale.

Primarily the methods are created to find out what are the skills and competencies that young people learn by completing voluntary activities and how their experiences (intercultural learning, job qualification, interpersonal skills, social identities, etc.) can be transferred for the purposes of social development?

Particular methods described in this paper include: case study, mainly oriented to explore community impact; personal development report as within the term of volunteering and at a later stage of life; biography method that in principal allows to learn the experiences of becoming volunteers for minority and socially excluded groups; qualitative research of documents (photos, drawings, notes) in order to include non-verbalised practices and hidden impacts into the process of social research. Other methods of qualitative nature are definitely possible in a research of voluntary experiences, meanwhile they don't make a focus of this paper.

An actual need to develop methodology of social research in volunteering was indicated in the *Analysis of the replies of the Member States of the European Union and acceding countries to the Commission questionnaire on voluntary activities of young people*. It states: "...much still needs to be done to improve the evaluation and monitoring of voluntary activities..." [1]. The sources of social information must be diversified and this brings qualitative methods into use. Diversification of social information allows inclusion and consideration of minority and previously excluded social experiences. Qualitative research gives information primarily on feelings, believes and attitudes of an individual social being and not generalised at the same time de-personalised statistical figures. It gives a possibility to a researcher to sensitise her research instrument and to adjust a focus of her research to an actual situation. In result we receive information that is highly personalised. It tells us stories of individual lives. That adds a humanitarian value to a current social research.

While using qualitative methods as a general approach to discovering social reality it helps us to look at the research questions both programmed in the research scheme and new up-coming questions that appear within the process of research. Methods of qualitative research do not only answer the questions How? and Why? They also allow answering the question What? Usually in the qualitative research like questionnaire a researcher already knows what is being both chosen and defined as a main subject of a research. Afterward the whole process of the research refers to the chosen definition. In result the picture of social reality is determined from the very start by the knowledge and interest of a researcher.

This is of cause true that any research is influenced by personal values of a scientist. And for qualitative methods the influence of a scientist appears even more visible, but in this regard the moderation of a process of social discoveries goes through motivation and encouragement of personal descriptive opinions of respondents and in-depth look into a field of research. For example, the first research question in the study on the impact of voluntary experiences on young people would be what is voluntary experience? For the quality of qualitative research it is important to know what respondents

themselves consider as voluntary experiences, because on this basis they create descriptive pictures of being active within different social domains. By knowing what respondents mean behind 'voluntary experience' we can harmonise the process of social research by being able to introduce the significant social meanings delivered by respondents into our research and its conclusions. Before starting to evaluate 'voluntary experience' we have to know what those who have such an experience mean by it. Consideration of respondents' impact increases validity of social research. In the contrary in the quantitative methodology what is being studied (how the subject looks and what are the main features to be analysed) is already decided prior to the beginning of a research.

Having described the focus of qualitative study as the focus on individual experiences, choices and attitudes we continue to look closer at different methods that facilitate social research of voluntary experiences.

The method to start with is a case study. Case study is a popular sociological method used broadly when there is a need to draw a general picture of a situation. In the field of voluntary experience it might be oriented to explore community impact. People as human beings live in the society. Society shapes our personality and every activity of an individual makes an influence on a society at a larger scale. Voluntary activities are meant for the society purposes. Therefore it is greatly important to make a clear estimation of results and impacts of voluntary activities into community life. For the purpose of development of deeper understanding of society trends we need to create a vast and detailed picture in which domains, by which tools and with which features voluntary activities bring changes into society. Human life is full of emotions and feelings that qualitative methodology targets. Therefore qualitative case study assists both a scientist and a broader audience to realise in a process and in a result what specific changes and influences have been made through voluntary activities and describes and delivers the conclusions in an easy accessible language.

For the case study we attract individual stories of volunteers, newspaper articles, feedback from the participants of related events, expert opinions, different published materials about particular voluntary activity including background papers, reports and proceedings, interviews with representatives of a target group, study of visual documents (photos, drawings, postcards, advertisements, logos, other promotional materials), analysis of mottos of related events, etc. Everything what comes into attention of a researcher is of a potential interest for a colourful, detailed and explanatory case study. The role of a researcher makes a very important part of a successful case study. A researcher must be creative and sensitive towards discovering of new and outstanding information.

As well as case study allows us to define community impact of volunteering, personal development report facilitates our knowledge of what an impact voluntary experience makes on an individual life of a volunteer. Short-term personal development reports covers the term of volunteering and is conducted prior, within and shortly after the term of volunteering. The aim of a short-term personal development report is to collect up-to-date information about current influences and changes that voluntary experience exercises above an individual life. Within short-term report we are able to compare the values and life practices actual for a person before and after term of volunteering. By this we can analyse immediate impacts that voluntary activities produce. At a later stage of life long-term personal development report might be undertaken. Within a certain period of life a volunteer returns in her memories to a previous voluntary experience and gives an opinion what was significant or insignificant in specific areas of voluntary experiences and how it is influenced (contributed or restricted) her future social achievements. Personal development report may be executed in a written or oral forms, when a volunteer describes her life on paper or participates in a semi-moderated interview. For both cases a list of pre-selected questions is desirable.

In social research special attention is being paid to discover life experiences of minority and socially excluded groups. A method that in principal allows learning social experiences of volunteering of minority and socially excluded groups is called biography method. Biography method is oriented to research a general life path when a special consideration is given to structural points of human biographies. Structural points of human biographies apply to certain events, conditions and people that played crucial role in setting up life strategies and determination of life achievements.

There is a demand of social development that every individual receives opportunity to enrich her personality and to harmonise relations with social world. That is why minority and socially excluded groups require specific measures of social actions in order to introduce those groups at an equal opportunity basis into society interaction. In order to do so, we need information how and why the groups have been named 'minority' and 'socially excluded' and shifted to a margin of society. This is our departure point in order to build the outreach strategies as a first measure to return those groups into full play on a stage of society life. In a research on volunteering we are mainly interested which competencies and life chances has a volunteer gained through her activism? How new situation of life has influenced personal motivation and world orientation of a volunteer? If any impact has been made on a close social circle of a volunteer, like family and friends? If new skills and self-confidence of a volunteer gives her better social benefits in terms of recognition, employment and social choices?

There is a set of requirements how to organise biography study for minority and socially excluded groups. General recommendations are drawn from my doctoral research *Social mechanisms of life style formation in the context of feminist paradigm* [2]. Biography study is usually, but not only an in-depth interview. Semi-structured or non-structured interviews are most appropriate. For a semi-structured interview a list of pre-defined guiding questions is desirable. These questions must scan the whole duration of life of a respondent and have a focus on specific periods, social institutions and organisations that produce an impact on individual life as well as the influence of significant others must be estimated and considered. Because a researcher is always directly or indirectly influences the content of interview (it has been proved that respondents try to give "desirable" answers related to their expectations of gender character and common life experience with interviewer) there is a requirement of a quality of a research to minimise such an influence. For that reason the same gender and related life experience of a respondent and an interviewer guarantee correct interpretation of the results of biography study. Similar life experience also facilitates social learning by establishing a common language.

Especially biography method allows verification of an impact of voluntary experiences in comparison to a life set held prior to volunteering. The results of biography study give best illustration to the changes occurred in result of social activism particularly due to voluntary involvement.

Last method to be described in this paper is qualitative research of documents. By qualitative research of documents we mean social analysis of photos, drawings, postcards, logos, pictures, advertisements, and other visual materials when visual description creates a basis to conclude about non-verbalised practices and hidden impacts of social interaction among individuals and their groups. Non-verbalised practices are among most significant to define social roles and positions and therefore they have to be included into the process of social research.

There is a big number of different materials that tend to promote volunteering in different ways. All of them can become a target set for a potential documentary research. A qualitative research of documents is focused on symbols and signs introduced in the documents that are studied. What is a popular and a specific meaning of these symbols and signs? How this meaning has been acquired? What is a target group of certain symbols, signs and their meanings?

This approach allows us to find out how efficient are our promotional efforts in voluntary field. It is a method to see if there is a proper response to the images associated with voluntary experiences? It is important to be aware if a consequent understanding between the meanings and symbols that voluntary activists put into popular materials and of a broader audience exists? Qualitative research of documents allows not only to answer the question if a symbol evokes a necessary associative meaning, but also allows to know how the connection between the symbol and its meaning was established and is currently supported.

Study of pictures and drawings made during the term of volunteering may tell us a lot about individual voluntary experience and what impact it has produced on the community. In general qualitative research of document is new among the methods that discover voluntary experiences, but has a great potential in further use.

Qualitative methods of social research, like case study, personal development report, biography method, qualitative research of documents described in this paper open new areas of social experiences that are important for better understanding of social reality and for the development of efficient social policy strategies. Among important social policy strategies are deeper institutionalisation and wider social recognition of voluntary activities. The results of qualitative studies contribute to visibility and quality of voluntary activities.

References

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2. Shalayeva, K., Social mechanisms of life style formation in the context of feminist paradigm. Doctoral dissertation., Kyiv, 2004, pp. 164-191.