Participation Among Marginalized Young People in Brazil: Using Action Research to Support Subjective Well-Being in Volunteering

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People have recognized the intrinsic value of informal exchanges of time, energy, and resources for creating a social context that supports human well-being. Attempts to harness these benefits by nongovernment and government agencies have led to the organization of structured platforms to nurture voluntary acts of public service and pro-social behavior. The instrumental value of volunteering remains a debated topic warranting investigation of the relationship between volunteering, well-being and active citizenship. A growing body of evidence in the western world suggests that positive mental states and good functioning often precede and help to cause good outcomes; that while it is possible for volunteering opportunities to feed an upward spiral of advantages for the individuals involved, they can also exacerbate inequalities between individuals. Using the concept of subjective well-being and action research as method, the paper explores ways of working with the dynamic nature and unequal distribution of subjective well-being to support the participation of marginalized groups.

Keywords: subjective well-being, volunteering, participation, active citizenship, action research, complex adaptive systems

Introduction

As far back as Aristotle, people have recognized the intrinsic value of informal exchanges of time, energy, and resources for creating a social context that supports human well-being (Stephens, Ryan-Collins & Boyle, 2008). There is now a wealth of social science research linking volunteering and subjective well-being (Helliwell, 2005). Understanding how voluntary action is related to subjective well-being is important in a post-materialist world (Aked, 2011). This paper confirms that this is the case.

This has economic, political, and ethical implications. Accountable and responsible government is not enough to build a just society. The role of nongovernment organizations in service and public good provision is increasing. In the wake of a financial crisis and in the context of globalization, there is an increased perception that separation of power is the key to social action. The concept of citizenship is for citizens playing an active role in their communities.

However, for achieving social change, we need engaged citizens. Volunteering can play a role in either in terms of delivery of social services or in the development of a new civil society that engages citizens in their communities. The very fact that people can, on a voluntary basis, act in ways that can give them a sense of belonging, purpose, and self-esteem is a significant development. The perspectives of those involved in the volunteering movement should be heard and acted upon.

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