Youth volunteer service as positive youth development in Latin America and the Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

Youth volunteer service is prevalent worldwide, though little systematic information exists on its forms and features in the Global South. Anecdotal evidence suggests that programs may embrace principles of positive youth development. The youth may be engaged in substantial, meaningful roles that impact their development while they positively impact others. This descriptive study assessed the forms and institutional features of youth volunteer service in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). A cross-sectional electronic survey was implemented with 374 sponsoring organizations throughout 12 countries in LAC; the organizations sponsored a total of 533 youth volunteer service programs. The programs functionally resemble a positive youth development approach, though the characteristics of the volunteers suggest that they may be more socio-economically advantaged. Implications are drawn for inclusive practices and further research.

1. Introduction

Youth are socialized through major institutions in society, most notably family, school, church, and government. They are also socialized by nonprofit organizations through volunteer service programs. Volunteer service can be designed to channel youth into productive activities that contribute to society while also increasing the personal, educational, and civic capacity of the youth who volunteer. Generally, the volunteer time commitment is intense and time-limited. Youth volunteer service programs in the United States are institutionalized, such as AmeriCorps national service or service-learning programs between educational institutions and nonprofit organizations. What is less well known are the forms, functions, and institutional features of similar youth volunteer service programs worldwide.

These programmatic forms of volunteer service are often referred to as civic service. McBride, Sherraden, Benitez, and Johnson (2004) conducted a cross-sectional global assessment of civic service programs in 2002 and 2003 identifying 210 programs worldwide. They found that a majority of programs were indeed targeted to youth volunteers, and most of them were located in the Global North. To examine the status of

civic service in the Global South in more depth, researchers in sub-Saharan Africa applied similar methodology in 2005 and 2006. Overall, they confirmed the results of the parent study, but were able to further isolate distinct features.

Patel, Perold, Mohamed, and Carapinha (2007) found that civic service in sub-Saharan Africa embodies a social development paradigm and uniquely embraces a continuum of voluntary action, such that service programs work in close partnership with informal volunteer and mutual aid networks. Patel states that the potential of this strategy is great "for promotion of social and economic development; to encourage participation of the socially excluded in development; and to achieve tangible and intangible improvements in the quality of life of people" (2007, p. 18). However, the achievement of such goals rests on the institutional features of the programs, including their individual goals and activities and how they structure and facilitate access to potential volunteers, not to mention larger issues of the political economy.

In this study, we expand the research on civic service in the Global South by examining the forms, functions, and features of civic service programs in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). In the LAC region, youth between the ages of 15 and 24 comprise roughly one-third of the population (CEPAL, 2006). Given their prevalence as well as the developmental potential of civic service, we focus specifically on programs that target youth as volunteers. We examine the institutional features of the programs as well as their approach to youth development, assessing their integration of positive youth development principles. The following discusses the potential relevance of

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youth volunteer service for youth development and how positive youth development may be a particularly salient approach for the LAC region.

2. Background

2.1. Operationalizing youth volunteer service

Across different nations and cultures, volunteerism has different meanings and takes different forms. Broadly, volunteerism is a form of civic engagement, whereby individuals voluntarily apply themselves in productive activities that benefit others (Cnann, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996). As a phenomenon, volunteerism can be viewed along continua of structure and time commitment (McBride, & Sherraden, 2007). One type is mutual aid. This represents informal care among community members, which is the backbone of primary group association in families and communities and is often influenced by informal institutional norms and may be of varying time commitments, often long-term with no end point. Another type includes organizationally-based volunteer roles. This form of volunteering is structured through organizations and may also vary in terms of time commitment from a one-time activity, such as working for a day handing out emergency care packages, to long-term roles, such as serving as treasurer of a social club. Other volunteer roles are not only organizationally-based but programmatically-based as well; there are distinct roles and activities for the volunteers that are performed within a prescribed time frame, which is often intensive but always time limited. There are dual goals of impacting service beneficiaries as well as the volunteers. This type of volunteerism is referred to as civic service (Perry, & Thomson, 2004; Sherraden, 2001). It is worthy of note that there is not an applicable direct translation of civic service in the predominant languages spoken in the LAC region (Tapia, 2003). As such, youth volunteer service is used synonymously with youth civic service as the term of reference for this phenomenon in the LAC region.

Sherraden (2001) defines civic service as: "an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national, or world community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to the participant" (p. 2). Unlike other types of volunteerism, civic service may or may not be voluntary. An example of a voluntary program in LAC is Servicio País, a program in Chile that places young professionals in low income communities to assist with environmental protection, citizen development, and economic development; a mandatory program is Servicio Social in Mexico, which places university and technical school students in professional placements for 6 to 12 months to apply their substantive skills as a requirement for university graduation (Johnson, Benítez, McBride, & Olate, 2004; Sherraden, & Sherraden, 1991). There may also be reward or remuneration for civic service, which also pushes the boundaries of volunteerism, though these features may be essential to leverage inclusion of those who might not otherwise be able to serve. For example, intensive roles may preclude participation in the labor market.

To study the forms of civic service and their features, an institutional view of program features has been advanced (McBride, & Sherraden, 2007; McBride et al., 2004; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Sherraden, & Rozario, 2001). These scholars suggest that the following features structure the service role and may link volunteers to it and keep them in it. The role is specified by its time commitment, eligibility characteristics, and activities. Features that leverage involvement may include financial support, training and supervision, reflection and connection with education and career. These features shape the volunteers' expectations, provide incentives for participation, and facilitate retention and positive effects (Eyler & Giles, 1997; Grusky, 2000; Melchior & Bailis, 2002; Moore & Sandholtz, 1999; Sherraden & Eberly, 1986). These are the basic features across which

a civic service program will vary. In the case of youth service, specifically, we are concerned with youth as the primary participants and those institutional features that may promote positive youth development as an end outcome.

2.2. Positive youth development

Positive youth development (PYD) is an approach that stresses the productive capacity of young people, embracing their current potential to make substantive contributions. If youth people realize this potential, they may increase their resiliency and set a trajectory for continued life success and contributions (Damon, 2004). PYD interventions are identified by their promotion of the "Five Cs," namely competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Lerner (2004) identifies aspects of interventions that are most likely to lead to these outcomes: the programs involve positive adult–youth relationships, youth skill-building activities, and opportunities for youth participation in and leadership of community-based activities.

Youth service programs may embrace all three aspects in varying degrees, especially participation and leadership. This type of task ownership and responsibility has been associated with higher levels of program effectiveness and goal achievement in youth service programs (Billig, 2000; Checkoway et al., 2003). Youth involvement in the planning of service-learning projects, substantive responsibilities during implementation, and interaction with community members are associated with improved self-concept, political engagement, and pro-social attitudes (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Moore, & Sandholtz, 1999; Morgan & Streb, 2001). Youth can also lead research and evaluation efforts that further enhance their experience and learning (Checkoway et al., 2003).

The effects of PYD interventions may be stronger among those youth categorized as marginalized or disadvantaged (Haski-Leventhal, Ronel, York, & Boaz, 2008; Spring, Dietz, & Grimm, 2007). In fact, the PYD movement emerged from resistance among scholars and practitioners to a deficit approach, treating youth as problems. While the PYD movement is not named as such in the LAC region, its principles are embraced. Rodriguez (2003, p. 2). Others discuss a transition from the history of *asistencialismo* in the LAC region to a current focus on *solidaridad*, or a transition from exclusion to inclusion of youth in civic and social welfare efforts, such that they become actors and not recipients (Tapia, 2003). The idea here is that the youth can be empowered to drive their own change and development as well as create positive impact in their communities. From an interventionist perspective, this process can still be facilitated through appropriate institutional structures as well as developmental goals and inclusive participation.

LAC societies are marked by social and economic exclusion, and disadvantage is real. Youth unemployment rates range from 11% to 40% with an average of 22% across countries in the region (CEPAL, 2006). The World Bank highlights a need to develop innovative strategies for regional development, specifically targeted to the education and employability of youth (World Bank, 2006). While not a panacea, youth volunteer service has the potential to address the human capital dilemma through opportunities to learn and develop skills. Research has demonstrated that it can cultivate both citizenship and regional development (Aguirre International, 1999; Cohen, 1997; Griffiths, 1998; Patel et al., 2007; Perry & Thomson, 2004; Sherraden, Sherraden, & Eberly, 1990; Starr, 1994). Service learning may be a particularly effective strategy for meeting local needs while developing knowledge, skills, and citizenship in the youth (Billig, 2000). Even mandatory service-learning courses, which are often criticized as potentially undermining a voluntary civic ethos, have been found to promote long-term civic action as evidenced by longitudinal research (Metz & Youniss, 2005). In LAC, youth volunteer service may go further in these goals if program features reflect a PYD or *solidaridad* approach (Tapia, 2007).