

Long abstract – Monographic section

YOUNG PEOPLE BEYOND STEREOTYPES

Edited by Carlo Buzzi

For others and for oneself. Young people and volunteering, between solidarity and identity

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In Italy there are 7 million people who, in addition to their daily commitments - study, family, work, sport, etc. - decide to do voluntary work for the benefit of the community. However, only 6% of young people between the ages of 18 and 29 continuously carry out activities that can be explicitly defined as "volunteering". Paradoxically, just the latter, although often seen as "fresh and enthusiastic forces", are asked to fit into organisational structures and value dimensions that are largely managed by older volunteers.

In fact, the process of generational change in the world of associations is rather slow.

This "process of adultification and ageing", accompanied by a tendency towards a gradual decrease in the number of voluntary organisations, makes it necessary to carefully study the perceptions and experiences of young people and adolescents, analysing also those activities that cannot be openly attributed to organised volunteering, but which can help to give shape and consistency to a youth solidarity undergoing profound changes.

The relationship between young people and volunteering is the focus of this paper, which reflects on how young people perceive volunteering and, more generally, how they situate themselves in a context of solidarity. We ask how adolescents, compared to other age groups, redefine the three key dimensions of solidarity: belonging, identification and responsibility. Which meanings predominate in young people's perceptions? What are the main motivational levers that may have brought young people closer to volunteering, particularly in the context of the pandemic emergency?

The contribution presented here is based on research carried out in Florence (Italy), which traditionally stands out in the national scenario for a certain richness and vibrancy of its world of volunteering. In particular, the study involved female and male students (407) from upper secondary schools in the metropolitan area of Florence.

In order to obtain as detailed and comprehensive a picture as possible, it was decided to use both quantitative and qualitative methods, which made it possible to study three dimensions: the definition of one's own experience and idea of volunteering; the motivations and recipients of the act of helping; and the representations of volunteering, even in the absence of direct experience.

Through an online form on the Datalifestudio portal of the University of Florence, distributed to the schools in the area that participated in the research, short text productions and emblematic images of volunteering were collected. The materials were analysed using the Nvivo and Atlas.Ti software.

The research path was then enriched with an additional qualitative methodological tool: the focus group.

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The picture that emerges from the research is rather jagged.

First of all, young people's approach to volunteering is mainly indirect, without any specific research, and sometimes encountered in a completely casual way. Voluntary activity is often experienced as a more or less pleasant way of spending one's free time, without the urgency of becoming a member of an association. In addition, there is a greater tendency for people living in the provinces to experience volunteering, due to the possibility of more easily intercepting the activities of already consolidated associative worlds in the area, or to the more capillary presence of those third parties that can act as facilitators of encounters: parishes, PCTO school projects, etc.

Despite the emphasis in recent years on the ability to live in virtual environments, the direct relational contribution, the close contact both with other volunteers and with the beneficiaries of voluntary action, continues to have an enormous explanatory power, even in the world of associations, which confirms itself as an important agent for the completion of educational processes. It is precisely because of its undoubtedly relational nature that volunteering is an ideal way of defining the self, that aspect of one's identity that is formed in relation to others, in order to overcome those obstacles that seem to be real barriers to socialisation in adolescence and that certainly affect one's communicative competence.

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