

PART THREE

The Language of Service

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What should we call 'Civic Service'? A commentary

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SUMMARY

Within the general discussion about nomenclature, the chapter suggests that the words used for civic service are conditioned by the view taken of the activity. Civic service can be viewed as having three different dimensions. The first is the motivation of those taking part. The second is the outputs from the activity itself and the value put upon them. The third is the societal requirement for civic service as an expression of citizenship.

People engage in civic service from a wide range of motives across a broad scale. For some, the motivation is even more important than the activity itself. Much civic service is shaped to recognise and respect motivation. Another school of thought places more emphasis on the output of civic service. The value may accrue to the object of the activity or it may

accrue to the doer of the activity, but more probably to both. Each instance of civic service, however, is structured to deliver more of one than the other. For others, the act of civic service is an important expression of citizenship, but here it falls to those who view citizenship more in terms of responsibilities than of rights. However, when civic service becomes too entwined with the apparatus of the state, it can become oppressive.

The argument advanced in this chapter favours giving more weight to the voluntary aspect of civic service. This enshrines a willingness to give service, ascribes a high value to the output, and sees it as among the moral duties of a citizen. Finally, it suggests that these are the values that best define civic service in a European context.

Introduction

Meaning trails a word like a comet's tail. So the same word can convey different meanings to different readers. It is important, for this first edition of *Service Enquiry*, that we examine our nomenclature so that we can map out some common ground for understanding one another.

The phenomenon of 'civic service' is described differently by various protagonists in the field. For me, there are three vectors that define the nature of the phenomenon. They are the *motivation* for people to engage in it, the *value* of its outputs and outcomes, and its place in creating or illustrating *citizenship*. I find it helpful to see these as tensions pulling the activity in different directions. There may in fact be more, and they certainly overlap.

My thesis is that the words you use depend upon the definition you choose. To illustrate my point I want to challenge the use of the word *service* and suggest that the addition of the adjective *voluntary* is necessary, at least in a European context.

Definition

I should add that I am focusing on service involving young people. The age range I cover is between 15 and 24, a commonly accepted (United Nations) definition of youth. It is my belief that the principles can be extended across service for other age groups, but they lie outside my experience. I am talking from a European perspective, though I am drawing on partial knowledge of other parts of the world.

Before I open the debate let us start with a definition of service. I am perfectly content with 'an organised period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national or world community, recognised and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to the participant' (Sherraden 2001).

The broad concept of service may mean roughly the same thing to most people. But it can be a cloak hiding a multitude of different perceptions, which give rise to different approaches.

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Motivation

The first tension is the value put upon the act of giving the service versus the value of the service given. In European countries with a tradition of service activities, there are organisations for which service must be an act of altruism and in this is distilled all its value. Central to this definition is the motivation of those giving the service. The purist would argue that unless it is given in a spirit of altruism, it is not true *service*. Giving certainly seems to play an important part in Menon et al.'s analysis of the words used for service around the world (see Chapter 12).

Exploring motivation

Whatever the organisational context, when we examine motivation we have to admit that service people will place themselves across a very broad spectrum. There will be those fully committed to acts of pure selflessness in a great cause. There are others who are less applied, who nevertheless wish to express solidarity with those in need of their service. There are those moved to take part in service out of curiosity and those who do it because there is no clear alternative. At the opposite end are those who are purely self-seeking and doing it for their own benefit. They perceive some direct gain or related advantage from which they will profit in the act, or subsequently, or both. Of course, individuals will seldom have a single motive, but one will tend to predominate.

There are pitfalls in each one of these stances. Pure altruism can so easily become condescending, patronising or just plain insulting. Philanthropy is not

the word it once was. Charles Dickens ridiculed the sending of handkerchiefs to wipe the noses of African children in distant days, when none of the receivers of this magnanimity wore garments with pockets. The overzealous intervention of the do-gooders, so blinded by their own cause that they cannot see its effects, is misplaced (and ill received) benevolence. There was no mistaking the tone of suspicion from francophone colleagues in response to the word *benevole* when we were constructing European Voluntary Service.

Service as an act of solidarity shows a degree of sympathy, but not necessarily an intention to remedy the condition to which it is a response. It might be a political expression and a lending of moral rather than practical support, which places limits on the act of giving.

Clearly, people giving service out of curiosity or through a lack of other options cannot be giving very generously, leading one to argue that the value of their service is compromised. Then there are those who would argue that those engaged in service purely out of self-interest are giving nothing at all and their service is worthless.

This has been further complicated by the compensation offered to those giving service under certain schemes. Where service involves being engaged full time and away from home, like the Peace Corps or European Voluntary Service, participants receive board and lodging in kind or in cash plus pocket money. The stipend may become the motivation for giving the service or it may seem so in countries where GDP differentials make pocket money greater than local salaries.

It has to be recognised that different individuals may be engaged in the same act of service, but from completely different ends of the motivation spectrum.

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Value

The second tension is about the main beneficiary of the outputs or the outcomes of the service. Does the principle value fall to the recipient of the service, or to the giver of the service? Again both sides will agree that the service is valuable to the receiver and to the person giving the service. But they will dispute where the emphasis should lie.

Giver or receiver? Who gets most value?

When examining service under the motivational microscope, it is taken for granted that there is a positive outcome, beneficial to the recipient. The direct recipient may be a person in some setting of social deficit, or a creature, as in guarding turtles' nests, or a landscape, as in cleaning polluted waterways, although in all of these examples, society may be seen to benefit indirectly. The beneficial outcome is the motive to which the giver of service responds.

However, there is also a benefit to the giver of the service. This is especially true where young people are involved. They learn a host of skills and aptitudes. Some are related to the task they carry out, some to the fact that they must work in concert with others and some to their inner selves where a sense of personal achievement and greater self-awareness build self-esteem. There is clear value to the giver of the service. This can be described as service-learning.

Where the value of the service to the giver is seen as the main intent, it can lead to the artificial creation of circumstances for service. When the gains-to-the-giver predominate, you get the construction of opportunities for giving service that are more valuable in themselves than in the service given. There have been examples of groups of young people engaged in loosely-structured, practical tasks in, let's say, a residential care-giving institution, who make significant learning gains from the tasks they perform and the attention they receive from supervisors and clients alike. Their self-absorption, however, their need for management and guidance, the client facilities their presence pre-empts, the mistakes they make, and the adverse micro-culture they create, mean that at best, their overall contribution is neutral, and at worst, they actually add negative value.

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Given that the value of service-learning is perceived as high, it becomes tempting, where other means of learning are exhausted, oversubscribed, unavailable or unaffordable to oblige young people into service, supposedly for their own benefit. The service becomes involuntary or at best seen only as a learning experience. Some would argue that it may be good education, but it certainly isn't service.

Would the circumstances be changed if the person compelled into service recognised the personal learning value halfway through or when his/her period of service had come to an end?

Many would argue that the value of the learning gain to the service giver is so great that making service compulsory is justified, whether the giver recognises it or not. The ends justify the means.

Citizenship

Some see citizenship as being about 'rights', some see it as about 'responsibilities'. Each side will acknowledge that it is both, but with a different balance. Service is important evidence of citizenship, and it seems to come at the responsibilities end of the spectrum. It may be a noble expression of belonging to a society, or a duty to be done in exchange for the privilege of membership. It may also be a duty undertaken to compensate for some privilege received like free university education.

Doing something for the abstract concept of a community rather than for an identifiable beneficiary is an expression of citizenship. It leads us quickly to serving in a military capacity, the pinnacle of which is to sacrifice one's life for one's country. That is all very well on the service spectrum, but courts controversy. One man's intervention is another man's invasion. Fighting for one's country can be seen as killing foreign soldiers.

Compulsory military service for young people (usually men) has spawned a counterpart, civil service. At first, opting out was disallowed completely. It was won as a concession by conscientious objectors to war, pacifists. It has grown as a proportion of military service to the point where, in Germany for example, numbers doing civil service almost equal those doing military service. Opting out on this scale is surely more a sort of draft dodging than widespread pacifism? But it is draft dodging connived at by modern armies increasingly unable to cope with an annual influx of tens of thousands of raw recruits.

Civil service undertaken in place of compulsory military service is good citizenship. It is optional because it is an alternative. But it is compulsory because it has to be done by the individual wishing to avoid military service. So there is no unselfish motivation on the part of the service giver and therefore it is not *service*. Perhaps if it is done for idealistic, pacifist reasons, that is sufficient to qualify as service.

Students receiving free, or highly subsidised, university education are required to offer a period of service when they graduate. Is it still *service*?

There is a parallel in the service schemes run in India, Nigeria and Egypt, where students receiving free, or highly subsidised, university education are required to offer a period of service when they graduate. It is compulsory to do so. Is it still *service*? It could be argued that as they knew about it all along, their decision to go to university was also a decision to give a period of unpaid service to their country.

Obliging people to exchange their labour for subsistence, or less, used to be called slavery. Indeed at the 'rights' end of the citizenship spectrum, obliging people into service is seen as exploitation, covered by the fig leaf of citizenship.

Another form of words

So far I have been careful to use the word 'service' throughout. Personally I don't like the word service. I admit it is related to the verb to serve, which means to do something for somebody. Service in English has strong commercial associations. Whilst service does not imply payment, it is associated with measurable value, negotiated or not. Service in English has strong commercial associations. Service in a flower shop or a bank is part of the transaction. In other circumstances service means something purely technical; having your car serviced or servicing your central heating boiler carries no connotations of giving. In short, service is a word with too wide a range of meanings to be used in a stand-alone context. It must be qualified.

In the UK the common qualification is *voluntary* service. With capital letters, or without, this is pretty widely understood. It conjures up a different set of images. The term *voluntary* removes the element of compulsion and therefore the stain of worthlessness or exploitation of the person delivering the service. Indeed, it is the 'voluntary' rather than the 'service', which carries the emphasis. Someone doing voluntary service is a volunteer rather than a server. Hence we centre our vocabulary on the words *volunteer* and *volunteering* which seem to lean towards the motivation vector in our analysis. Continental (European) English has coined the expression 'voluntarism', which is a new word in the English lexicon. To my ears, service lays stress on compulsion or at least exchange, although I concede that it can mean giving, if you see service as primarily in a giving mode.

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So is volunteering ok?

Sherraden's definition holds for voluntary service as it does for civil service. Volunteering as an instrument for engaging young people is certainly fashionable nowadays. It is being set up in China, Argentina, and Nigeria, engulfing the European Union and now the Pre-Accession States of central Europe.

It has not developed in Europe unopposed. The strong social traditions of Scandinavia have raised objection to volunteering in the care-giving sector. Volunteers are seen as usurping the role of the state. It is for the state to make social provision for all its members: the use of volunteers implies that the state is shirking its obligations.

Organised labour feels threatened by volunteering. It may be taking paid employment from workers, getting something for nothing, an assault on the wage structure, and an undermining of the bargaining power of employees.

Volunteering is an attractive tool for non-formal learning. It is useful to promote social inclusion among those without formal qualifications and therefore without jobs. But using any suspect measures to get young people without jobs to volunteer may leave it vulnerable to challenge.

Volunteering may still be culturally specific. Recent research carried out by Clive Harris (2002) found that participation in 'organised' voluntary service was less common among young people in certain ethnic minorities in the United Kingdom. But examination of their social roles found them heavily committed to unremunerated actions of social support to family, friends or their immediate community, which, without question, would be categorised as volunteering. But without being organised, it is not recognised.

Many African countries face the dual problem of substantive social need and a surplus of educated and uneducated young people without employment opportunities. These societies make big efforts to mobilise their youth to address poverty, especially among their peers. They are urged to do so with no remuneration. But there are no hang ups there about service or volunteering. It is straightforward social mobilisation, a plain, common-sense response to the challenge of development.

At the end of the day, cultural and social circumstances are going to determine how volunteering or service operates in any given context, in any given country. They will determine how young people are drawn to participate and how society organises those opportunities. According to the environment, however, it will sway from one vector to another. My argument is that the nomenclature will sway with it. Service is not a single homogenous phenomenon. The words we use to describe it are not neutral; they carry values. It is up to us to be aware of the values they carry and to deploy them accordingly.

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