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Understanding 'Service'

Words in the context of history and culture

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SUMMARY

Long-term, intensive volunteering or 'civic service' is an emerging global phenomenon. This is evident in the range of service programmes that are present in both developing and developed nations. However, the term 'service' means different things in different cultural contexts. What is the best name for this phenomenon, so that it can be discussed and studied across nations and cultures?

This chapter¹ explores the meanings of 'service' in six ancient languages: Greek, Latin, Chinese, Japanese, Swahili, and Sanskrit. We identify three common attributes of the concept across the languages. First, service is an act, undertaken by an individual in relation to other individuals or the community. Second, service is associated with outcomes. The words used

to denote service highlight a range of anticipated outcomes from the perspective of the server and the served. Finally, beneficiaries are diverse. Individuals and society are identified as beneficiaries of service.

This historical analysis may help inform the 'naming' of long-term, intensive volunteering worldwide. We recommend that similarities in each culture's contemporary conception of service be emphasised to suggest a common name, and that differences in forms of service be captured as variables. In this way, cultural differences might begin to be understood using the tools of social science. We believe this will be necessary if the causes and effects of service are to be understood across cultures, and if service is to reach its practical potential in programmes and policy.

Introduction

Effective communication is based on collective understanding of words being used and their meanings. When words are not explicitly defined and referenced, discussion about a phenomenon may be misguided and complicated. Without clear conceptual references and boundaries, the ability to study, inform, and promote a phenomenon is compromised. Arguably, this is the case with service, or long-term, intensive volunteering.

Sherraden (2001: 2) refers to this phenomenon as civic service, which means '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'. Why civic? Civic connotes public action and public benefit. Strangers near and far may benefit from the actions of the server. Civic service programme examples include national service programmes in Germany and Nigeria, and programmes such as the Japanese Overseas Co-operation Volunteers, the United States' Peace Corps, and European Voluntary Service. But is civic service the best term to use?

While this conception and definition are based on cross-national research and discussions (Ford Foundation 2000; McBride, Benítez & Sherraden 2003; Sherraden, Sherraden & Eberly, 1990), it is important that conceptions of 'service' be explored worldwide. What is the best name for this phenomenon, so that it can be discussed and studied across nations and cultures?

This chapter explores meanings of 'service' across cultures and through time.² Language is an expression of culture, providing insights into existing and changing social and political beliefs, values, and attitudes (Skinner 1989). In this chapter, words are treated as windows to understand the evolution and the conceptualisation of service in different cultural contexts. We consider the implications of such an analysis for a global understanding of the term 'service'.

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A historical, global vocabulary of service

Throughout history, how was 'service' expressed, and what forms did it take? We address this question through a brief examination of words, philosophies, and histories across six different languages. Greek, Latin, Chinese, Japanese, Swahili, and Sanskrit represent some of the most influential languages in the ancient and the classical world.³ They also reflect the linguistic origins of some of the major languages spoken today in different regions of the world.

To inform this review, interviews were conducted with language scholars. On-line resources such as dictionaries and lexicons supplemented the interviews. This analysis extends roughly from 800 BC to the 8th century AD. The time period from

700 AD to the present is largely not explored due to the cultural transitions and mixing that have occurred in this period. Emphasis is placed on comparisons among words and meanings to develop an understanding of their common attributes.

Greek and Latin

The closest word for service in Greek is a verb – *charizo*, meaning *to do something good* (Freeman 2001). In Latin, the word for service is *beneficium*, meaning *an act tending to the benefit of another* (Freeman 2001) or 'doing good deeds'. In both Greece and Rome, every male citizen had obligations towards the city-state, which had to be fulfilled. Most often, such obligations took the form of military service. While military service was voluntary in the city-states, peer pressure amongst the nobility acted as the motivating factor. Military service for the nobility was unpaid. In contrast, commoners were recruited, and paid for the service they rendered. Service in the military was seen positively as service to Sparta or to Rome. The opportunity to serve in the military was seen as a privilege offered by the city-state to the citizen.

The formalisation of service as charitable actions came with the emergence of Christianity around the second century AD (Christian History Institute no date). Christian beliefs emphasised interconnectedness among people. With the rise of the Byzantine Empire, both Greece and Rome witnessed a formalisation of service activities by the Church, such as the appointment of officials to look after the welfare of the people (Freeman 2001).

Chinese

The Chinese language does not have a specific character for service, but service exists in a synthesis between religion and philosophy. The main influences in ancient China were Confucianism and Buddhism. The idea of service in Chinese is captured in the expression, *zuo shan shi*, meaning *do good things* (Chiang 2001). In Confucianism, virtue is the cornerstone of all human activity. Values are based on one concept – *Jen* meaning *humaneness* (Hooker 1996). One attains humaneness or virtue by following a proper way of behaving. Meng Tzu, a student of Confucius, added the concept of *I* meaning *righteousness* or *duty* to the original concept of *Jen* (humaneness or benevolence) (Hooker 1996). Mo Tzu (470 to 391 BC) believed that all people were created equal and that differences of wealth and status were human. *Righteousness* or *Jen* for Mo Tzu was not achieved by extending help only to one's family or others of similar social status, as Meng Tzu espoused, but by helping anyone in need. Within this school of Confucian thought we see a precursor to the modern Western idea of service.

Japanese

Buddhism came to Japan through Korea around the 6th century AD (Hendry 2000). The Japanese nobility adopted Buddhism as their religion. As a consequence, there was widespread support for activities such as building temples, supporting orphanages, feeding the hungry, and cleaning public streets (Fujiwara 2001). These activities were considered acts of community service and often had formal sanction (Hudson 1994). By the 8th century AD, Buddhism became the state religion of Japan. It is within this context that the word *hooshi* emerged in Japanese language. *Hooshi* symbolizes *any activity done out of goodwill, or an activity done for others without any compensation* (Fujiwara 2001). *Hooshi* is different from other words such as *Shigoto*, which means *work for compensation*, or even *Gimu* meaning *duty*. Today, *hooshi* has been replaced by a more modern word – *volunteer* (Fujiwara 2001).

Swahili

Unlike the strong filial connection emphasised in ancient Chinese and Japanese cultures, Swahili (or Kiswahili) emphasises communal values. Service in Kiswahili is *Kujitolea* meaning *the giving of self for the benefit of others* (Mutonya 2001). The focus of *Kujitolea* is on the social value of service and not on monetary compensation. Similar sentiments are found in the South African concept of *ubuntu* (Republic of South Africa 1997: clause 24) in isiZulu. *Ubuntu* emphasises the connectivity of individuals through the phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* meaning *A person is a person through other persons or I am what I am because of you*.

Sanskrit

Sanskrit is the oldest language of India, and is considered to be the mother of all European languages (Schiffman 1999). Classical Sanskrit flourished in India from 500 BC to 1 000 AD. The root word *seva* denotes *service* in Sanskrit, and is still used today in Hindi (Cappeller Sanskrit English Dictionary 2001). Other words can also be found in Sanskrit that mean help or assistance. For example, *upakriya* means *service or benefit* (Cappeller Sanskrit English Dictionary 2001). Similarly, *purvopakarin* means *one who has rendered a person a service* (Cappeller Sanskrit English Dictionary 2001).

Service actions, outcomes and beneficiaries

The historical conceptions of service have implications for contemporary word use and conceptual development. There are common attributes across these languages, their words, and their meanings. Primarily, service is conceived as an action that produces positive outcomes for a range of beneficiaries.

Service as an act

Across the examined languages, service has historically referred to actions of individuals in relation to others, be it other individuals in the community or the government. In all the cultures, service by individuals is not conceptualised as 'self service'. Rather, it is seen as the obligation of the individual to render some form of service to others, be it military or community service. In cultures such as China and Japan, religion played an important role in fostering service as a 'semi-altruistic' action. In other cultures, motivation to perform service emerged out of feelings of obligation toward the community, be it city-state or clan. Obligation, therefore, featured in relationships that were both hierarchical and non-hierarchical.

Outcomes of service

The words reveal that acts of service are intended to produce outcomes for both the server and the served. Depending on the context, the served were either city-states or individuals in the community. Individuals in all the cultures played the role of service providers. The mutual benefit perceived by the server and the served negates the idea of service as self-sacrifice.

Service is conceived as an action that produces positive outcomes for a range of beneficiaries

Enrolment in the army by the nobility benefited Sparta and Rome. By defending the interests of the city-states, the nobility in Greece or Rome gained peer acceptance.

In China, individuals came to the aid of their communities by providing food to the hungry, building bridges, or repairing streets. The servers in turn were assured of a better future in their afterlife, in accordance with Buddhist beliefs. Similarly in Japan, god-like status was given to individuals who provided exemplary service to their communities. As the words symbolising service in both Swahili and isiZulu indicate, entire communities were benefactors of service. A similar sentiment is echoed in the acts of *dana* of the Vedic period.

Beneficiaries of service

Dynamic and varied notions of community exist in different cultures. Certain cultures seem to have extended their in-group, while others appear more inward-looking. For instance, under traditional Confucian thought, strangers outside the village were not given help. This notion of the in-group changed with the inclusion of *I* (*righteousness or duty*) into the Confucian concept of *Jen* (*humaneness or benevolence*). Changes in the definitions of community have implications for service in terms of who benefits from the service activity.

Implications

Historically, service has referred to actions that are beneficial to others, be they kin, clan, or society. Service has also been conceptualised as the duty or responsibility of the individual. The definition of service as formal action (Sherraden 2001), however, reveals a contemporary conception of service that is rooted in *societal* systems of care and governance. This does not mean that governments and nobility did not structure 'service' experiences in the past; but today, structures exist through which an individual may apply him or herself, such as a two-week service project in Colombia or a two-year service obligation in Nigeria. Thus, service can be construed not as 'providing a service' but as 'performing service'.

The definition of service as formal action reveals a contemporary conception of service that is rooted in societal systems of care and governance

Today, service activities are also targeted at outcomes that benefit the served and society in general. The historical motivations to serve – religious and non-religious – are bolstered today by stipends, educational incentives, and cross-cultural opportunities (McBride et al. 2003).

Just as there were differences across the examined cultures and their languages throughout history, there are likely to be many differences today. If service is a phenomenon that exists around the world, it is poorly understood and little studied. Some effort to *name* it – to conceptualise, operationalise, and generalise it – is needed for efficient communication and study. But is 'service' the best word?

The contexts of culture, language, and time influence the way a concept is understood. The richness of different meanings of service and related words should be appreciated in their own right, valuing all of the varied dimensions and nuances. However, we also recommend that similarities in each culture's contemporary conception of service be emphasised to suggest a common name, whether that be service or some other name. We also recommend that differences in forms of service be captured as variables. Examples of variables might include service at different ages; service by males and females; service under the auspices of the state, church, or other organisation. In this way, cultural differences can begin to be understood using the tools of social science. This approach cannot tell us everything, but it can potentially be a step toward greater understanding. In this light, differences in forms of service within and across cultures are empirical questions that can be assessed. We believe this will be necessary if the causes and effects of service are to be understood, and if service is to reach its practical potential in programmes and policy.

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Notes

- ¹ For the paper that describes the full research and analysis upon which this chapter is based, please visit the Global Service Institute (GSI) web site at <http://gwbweb.wustl.edu/csd/gsi/publications/>.
- ² This linguistic analysis is one of several methods that GSI is using to define and operationalise service in an international context. Service programmes, research, and theories are being reviewed worldwide. Additional reports are forthcoming.
- ³ Ancient languages of the Americas such as Mayan are not included in this analysis. Languages of the Middle East such as Hebrew and Arabic are also not represented here.