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Personal Experience of Education for Formaly Organised Older Volunteering

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Abstract

Despite various authors pointing out that the education of older adult volunteers is important, there has been little attempt to explain the personal experience of participants in particular educational situations. The aim of this research was to investigate the experience of older adults—students of Slovenian Third Age University—related to the devising and delivering a museum-based educational programme and formaly organised voluntary work of cultural mediators in museums. The research paradigm was phenomenological. Ethnographic participatory observation and semi-structured interviews were applied. An integrated, holistic approach research design was based on purposive samples of three groups of participants: older volunteers, museum staff and older adult educators (authors of the project). The results of the research are related to the findings about how older adults' education and volunteering of was personally experienced by different actors in the project. Four themes were defined: personal motivation, expectations, involvement and general understanding of the importance of the project. It is suggested that the experience and perception of volunteers by institution staff is one of the most important factors for the development of older adult volunteering in a formal organisational setting.

Keywords: experience, volunteers, cultural mediators, older adult education, Slovenian Third Age University

1. Introduction

This research is prompted by the need to develop new conceptual frameworks and practices supporting active ageing in Europe, with special reference to Slovenia, a post-communist Central European country. From the perspective of older adults, organised voluntary (cultural) work is an opportunity for learning and personal growth. It is also important from the point of view of older adult participation in society, since it improves older adults' physical and mental well-being and their social inclusion (Godbout, Filiatraut, & Plante, 2012; Cohen et al., 2006; Greenfield & Marks, 2004). The inclusion of older adults in long-term voluntary work and their performance requires accompanying education of all participants, most notably the institution staff (i.e. staff in the institution where volunteers are engaged) and volunteers. The paper presents a multi-method qualitative study on personal experience of three groups of people, involved in a project of voluntary work in cultural heritage: older volunteers (hereafter "volunteers") who have been engaged as cultural mediators in museums, the mentoring and non-participating staff in museums (hereafter "museum staff"), and project developers/authors (hereafter "older adult educators"). The study is based on two conceptual frameworks, namely cultural voluntarism and education of older adults. In modern reconsiderations of relationships between work, leisure time, social capital, active ageing and increased life expectancy, both frameworks are emerging as an area of innovation.

2. Theoretical Framework

Volunteering of older adults, in reference to the concepts of *active* and *productive ageing* (see Hank & Erlinghagen, 2009; Warburton, Paynter, & Petriwskyj, 2007), has been less noticed than the voluntarism of the young and has been less researched in Europe (see Malec-Rawinski, 2014). The voluntary work of older adults can be divided into three groups: (a) work in families and within friendly relations (informal), (b) work in various associations and societies (such as societies of rural women, reading groups), referred to as non-formal organised voluntary work, and (c) voluntary work that takes place upon signing an activity agreement, which can

be referred to as formal or professionalised organised volunteering. Since the latter is relatively rare, the purpose of our research was to contribute to acquiring knowledge on older adult education for the formaly organised voluntary public cultural institutions, such as museums.

The inclusion of older adults in voluntary work is influenced by several factors, as shown in empirical studies: personal characteristics (such as physical and mental health), active social role, religiosity, altruistic values, professional experience, social and economic status (financial resources, contacts with friends and in the social network), characteristics of the environment in which older adults live (possibilities for inclusion in voluntary work), satisfaction with their life in their living environment (Dury et al., 2014; Godbout et al., 2012; Komp, Tilburg, & Groenou, 2012). The inclusion of older adults in voluntary work is influenced by the quality of social resources, existing in the socio-cultural environment. It has been found that voluntary work in Europe is not evenly distributed. Ehlers, Naegele and Reichert (2011) argue, that voluntary work is more widely spread in Nordic countries than in southern Europe. Though Slovenia was not included in the research, it can be assumed that formally organised older volunteering is in Slovenia less developed as it is less developed in Mediterranean and post-communist countries.

Another concept that led us in our research was *the education of older adults* within the lifelong learning theory. There is a growing interest in older adult education due to the new stratification of society and the new cultural organisation of the stages of life. The need for constructing new social roles for older adults and reflecting on the relationship between work/employment and leisure time/retirement is developing (Alfageme, 2014). Possibilities for the development of new social roles are evident also in volunteering that can be developed in most public institutions, such as museums, educational and cultural or health care organisations as well as non-governmental organisations. In order to do this, the openness of the organisation into public space is important as well as the understanding of individual experience of volunteers. The second reason for the interest in the older adult education is grounded in the need for the development of relational goods (Nussbaum, 2010), while the third reason is the establishment of the group of "new older adults", who actively shape their own biographies.

Due to demographic and socio-economic changes, there is a growing need to design new social roles of older adults; however, relatively few studies cover this field. The reason for that is not only the recession, but also a shift in researchers' and policies' focus as far as older adults are concerned. In the 1980s and 1990s, research on older adults focused on the so called "non-problematic factors", which means dynamic older adults in their third age. However, since 2000 the research and also the attention of politicians have turned towards the "problematic factors" of ageing (in terms of economy and health) and towards the "difficult and demanding advanced age". Also in Slovenia, studies have been oriented towards "care for the elderly" in the community and catering social and health needs of older people (Hlebec, Mali, & Filipovič Hrast, 2014; Hvalič Touzery, 2014; Jelenc Krašovec & Kump, 2014; Kydd et al., 2014). Moreover, research of older adults has been influenced by the neoliberal belief that the social roles of older adults will form automatically, according to the needs of the market. The seemingly "spontaneous" market-triggered shaping of new roles of older adults can also be seen in some forms of international voluntarism which create a new market of skilled volunteers (Lough & Xiang, 2014). Commercial thinking is being opposed by researchers with various innovative practices, emphasising the capacity of older adults for activities (*agency*) which are not regulated by commercial relations. An example of such induced practice is the project of voluntary work, related to cultural heritage, which is the subject of our empirical study.

The shaping of new roles—based on needs and competencies is indicated by the development of post-materialistic values, the theory of compassion/empathy, social and cultural capital, relational goods and the formation of critical reflexion on the dynamics of the production of objects, knowledge and values. The problem of how to shape space and time intervals, in which it would be possible to design, preserve and transfer cultural heritage, community memories and narrative knowledge, is established. This is the position of questioning, which looks for new dimensions/forms for something that used to take place in the local and family settings, while in modern times, the important role of preserving cultural heritage seems to be taken by museums, libraries, galleries and other cultural institutions that also collaborate with older voluntary cultural mediators.

The above-mentioned concepts were the basis for conducting a research on individual experience of different actors (volunteers, mentors, older adult educators) within the project of voluntary work. So far, Slovenian Third Age University has developed different types of cultural voluntary work in different fields, i.e. health (groups of story tellers in hospitals), sustainable development and natural heritage (botanical garden volunteers), new media (Each-One-Teach-One network of learning in voluntary tandems), and cultural heritage (cultural mediators in museums). Our empirical research is on the project "Cultural mediators", having given rise to the educational programme on older voluntary work. The educational programme was created in cooperation with the Slovenian

Museum Network and the Network of Slovenian Third Age University (hereafter U3A). The latter shaped the concept of older learners'cultural mediating to meet their own needs: they wanted older adults' (U3A students) knowledge to get more public recognition, orienting their education towards a tangible goal, thus increasing their motivation for learning. Slovenian U3A is the biggest network of non-formal adult education in Slovenia, established in 1984, with today over 20,000 older adult students (Findeisen, 2010). The first developmental phase of the project "Cultural mediators" took place between 2006 and 2009 (Bračun Sova, 2009), leading later on to the development of older adults' various volunteering practices.

3. Method

3.1 Scope and Aims of the Empirical Research

Despite various authors (Komp et al., 2012; Bračun Sova, 2009; Warburton et al., 2007) pointing out that the education of volunteers is important, there has been little attempt to explain the personal experience of participants in particular educational situations. The aim of the research was to give an insight into the personal experience of volunteers, museum mentors and older adult educators, related to the devising and delivering of a museum-based educational programme and organised voluntary work of cultural mediators in museums.

Participants in the research were:

a) volunteers in museums (U3A students),

b) museum staff and

c) older adult educators (U3A staff, authors of the project).

The main research question was: how do volunteers in museums, museum staff and older adult educators experience educational programme for voluntary work and the introduction of volunteers in museums?

Our questions were:

(a) What motivated volunteers and museum staff to get involved in the voluntary practice for cultural mediators and mentoring?

(b) What did volunteers and their mentors expect and how did they perceive the educational programme for voluntary work and the work they were going to perform?

(c) How were the volunteers accepted by the museum staff, particularly the staff that was not directly involved in the project of voluntary cultural mediating?

(d) How did volunteers, museum staff and older adult educatiors understand the importance of the project of voluntary cultural mediating?

Given the study's aim to provide insight into the personal experience of volunteers and other actors in the project, the phenomenological research paradigm was selected. Phenomenology was chosen for its ability to capture the subjectivity of experience as lived and contextual phenomena.

3.2 Research Methods and Procedures

The analysis presented here is based on ethnographic participatory observation and the technique of individual non-directive interviews. The research followed the principles of phenomenological qualitative research (Mustakas, 1990; Wertz et al., 2011; Price, 2013).

The main sources of data were non-directive phenomenological interviews. A loose scenario was prepared for the interviews (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Interviews were conducted with volunteers, museum staff/their mentors and other museum staff that were not directly involved in the project. In order to better understand the context of a phenomenon, the conceptual developers were included in the research.

A total of 18 individuals participated in the interviews (cf. Table 1), two of which were male and 16 females. One interviewee was below 50, while 17 were over 50. Respondents who were supposed to provide most analytical description of their experience were selected.

Table 1. Participants in the interviews

	Number	Level of education
Volunteers	10	Secondary school (4),
(U3A students who were engaged as voluntary cultural mediators in museums)		University-level education (6)
Museum staff – mentors	3	University-level education (3)
(Mentors of volunteers in museums)		
Museum staff – other	3	University-level education (3)
(Museum staff who were not directly involved in the project of voluntary cultural mediating)		
Older adult educators	2	PhD (2)
(U3A staff, authors of the project of voluntary cultural mediating)		

The main focus was on the participants' narration (ideographic mode). During the interviews the participants were invited to reflect on their experience with the education for museum volunteering, to share instances that stood out from these experiences, and to talk about how these experience were related to them personally. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. Data was also collected through observation, through participation at the educational sessions and through the project documentation analysis.

The data were collected from 2012 until 2014. Out of eight Slovenian museums included in the project of voluntary cultural mediating, two museums were chosen for this in-depth qualitative research: The Museum of Architecture and The Slovene Etnographic Museum, both located in Ljubljana. They hold different collections of artefacts, thus offering a number of opportunities for engaging volunteers. Voluntary work was initially formalised by signing two types of agreements: between the museums and U3A and between each museum and each individual volunteer. It has to be noted that in 2015 the volunteers are still active in both insitutions.

Table 2. Data collection

Technique	Place	Year
Interview		
Volunteers	U3A, museum	2012-2014
Museum staff	Museum	2012
Older adult educators	U3A	2014
Participatory observation	Museum	2012 (1 week)
		2014 (1 week)
Documentation analysis	U3A	2014

In order to analyse and interpret the data, we used a mixture of ideas from the grounded theory methodology and experience research methodology (interpretative phenomenological analysis). First a preliminary thematic analysis was carried out, codes were attributed, then the basic thematic cores (classification) were formed and further on the typology of phenomena was prepared within particular themes (Saldana, 2013).

4. Results and Discussion

The findings are organised, analysed around and focuse on four key themes:

- Personal motivation

(for being included in the voluntary practice of cultural mediators),

- Expectations and perception

(expectations and perception of the educational programme and voluntary work),

- Involvement of volunteers

(acceptance/integration in new settings, contacts and acceptance of the volunteers in the museum), and

- Understanding the importance of the project

(opinion on the programme development and the network of voluntary cultural mediators).

The results will be illustrated using single citations from interviews simultaneosly linked to other studies. Thus an extended interpretation (Roth, 2012) of the results is possible.

4.1 Personal Motivation

"I don't know how I would have coped if I hadn't had this voluntary work in the architectural museum. So, I go there for three hours every day, otherwise I would have sat at home and reflected upon how my life has come to a standstill." [A female volunteer, The Museum of Architecture, 2013, Int. 7].

Individuals quoted various psychological factors (motives) that influenced their inclusion in the project. Studies show that the motives of older volunteers who are still employed are mostly career-related (see Principi, Warburton, Schippers, & Di Rosa, 2013). In our research, however, this type of motives appeared in the mentors to older adult volunteers. Mentors who joined the programme as museum staff quoted various motives referring to their work. The reasons they mentioned were connected to their interests for career efficiency, for example, the volunteers' work was useful for their work (work assistance), they wanted to open their work environment to new people and thus contribute to the quality of the museum, or working with volunteers was part of their tasks (educator).

Volunteers' motives, however, were predominantly connected to making their time meaningful (structuring of their time, pursuing an activity that is important for the individual), introducing novelties and finding interest for a particular area (they wish to gain new knowledge, to discover something new in comparison to their previous professional work), they were guided by the feeling that they were still capable of learning. Social motives are also present (the wish to be in contact with other people, the possibility to meet new people with similar interests/development of social relations). They expressed the desire to be useful to others (the wish to transfer knowledge to others). They mentioned the situation of being enrolled in programmes at Third Age University as an important factor enabling them to enter the volunteers' network, which can be interpreted with the quality of social resources surrounding them.

Most often the desire for novelty appears as the motive for inclusion in voluntary work and education. What was told also revealed the importance of the possibility which emerged (the educational programme was organised by the U3A), and which was perceived as an opportunity for something new and for making their knolwedge useful.

4.2 Expectations and Perception

"Voluntary work is yet another gift in my life." [A female volunteer, Museum of Architecture, 2013, Int. 8].

Volunteers' narrations express various positive feelings (satisfaction, joy, respect—towards the institution and their work). They describe emotions that they are less anxious, that they are dedicated to work (they are dedicated to the mission of the organisation; they identify with the institution; they use the first person plural "we"). According to their statements, voluntary work supports their physical well-being, since they speak of their feeling of satisfaction and belief that they are also more attentive to others. This can be interpreted as the formation of a new social role. With retirement, older adults lose their working roles, many of them lose their parental and marital roles (women who become widows). Voluntary work provides them with a new identification with a group in which they develop mutual bonds. Intergenerational connecting takes place, they speak to each other in more informal terms and also socialise in an informal environment, which the interviewees experience as important.

Volunteers were asked about their experience of the educational programme and the induction into voluntary work. Volunteers expected something new, but they also experienced fear of the new, particularly the fear of not being accepted by the museum staff. They were uncertain as to what the museum staff expected from them. Individuals who expected too much and whose expectations were not met discontinued their work. For successful integration into voluntary work realistic expectations are important. Expectations are dealt with in the educational programme.

The educational programme is mostly assessed as a good process of acquiring knowledge and getting familiar with the museum. After getting to know their work (following the initial education and training at work), they carried it out with dedication (zeal), as presented in the statement bellow.

"[…] I adore everything that we show, so from this point of view I could, with all enthusiasm, give information about what is important to me or "perfect", beautiful and I pass information on the person who comes to listen to this. I introduced a certain note of my own, myself and also my colleagues who do this. This amateur note, a certain fervent relation, a passion you invest in your work, unlike those who, of course, are professionally impeccable, but they do it, because they have to, because it is actually their job, because it is business, because it is their work." [A female volunteer, The Slovenian Ethnographic Museum, 2012, Int. 2].

Mentors, on the other hand, did not nurture high expectations and during the discussion it appeared as if they wanted to shield themselves from disappointment. When discussing their expectations they were reserved, but they affirmed that "their expectations had been surpassed". This can lead to the conclusion that their expectations were relatively low. As cultural mediators started working as volunteers, their expectations also began to grow. When starting working with volunteers, mentors were reserved ("without expectations"), however, when they got familiar with the volunteers they formed an idea of the range of options the relationship could develop into. This also confirms the assumption that the environment is sceptic towards older adult volunteers (the burden of social stereotypes). Only once they get to know them do they form higher expectations. The museum mentors interpreted their absence of expectations as their desire "not to expose the volunteers to stress".

Mentoring older adult volunteers is a special relationship where the mentee is most of the times older than the mentor. Although this difference in age may present an obstacle, this was not the case in our interviews, since all mentors declared that the experience of older adults has to be respected and that the experience has to be considered in the plan for mentoring at work. Mentoring is not always simple, since groups consist of people with different characters and wishes. Moreover, it is difficult to set a limit between the volunteer's and the employee's social roles. For this reason, signing cooperation agreements presents the introductive part delimiting the employee's from the volunteer's field of activity in the museum. Volunteers expect mentors to guide them, to be honest with them and to include them in projects where they can be useful.

All those who were included in the project and interviewed in the study had positive experience with the educational programme and valued it very highly (in terms of *contents and organisation)*. The members of the museum staff who were not directly involved were somewhat more sceptic (their opinion was that some volunteers decided too hastily on the type of their work and that their training should have been longer).

Between the beginnings when no specific expectations existed, and the evaluation phase, a great difference became evident, namely in the enthusiasm, formed desires and also in the innovative approach to work. When compared the museums staff's expectations and perceptions on one hand, and the volunteers' expectations and and perceptions on the other hand showed a difference. The museum staff (the mentors) did not expect much, whereas the volunteers were mostly uncertain about what to expect.

4.3 Involvement

The key finding is that everybody felt uneasy at the beginning of the project of voluntary cultural mediating. The museum staff doubted the success of the project. The volunteers felt uneasy because they noticed that some of the museum staff doubted the success (did not accept them, had no time, etc.). Through getting to know each other the uneasiness melted away and the volunteers were accepted as external workers. There was a correlation between the satisfaction of volunteers and their contacts with the museum staff. The volunteers who expressed their satisfaction had many contacts with the employees. Genuine relationships developed. The volunteers who expressed a lack of satisfaction had fewer contacts with the museum staff. It is difficult to clearly identify the reason of the dissatisfaction, but there is a correlation between social contacts and satisfaction.

Since mentors also noticed the initial resistance and doubt of the institution staff, it was difficult to recruit mentors to the museum. Distrust towards older adult volunteers was explained in terms that they lack the professional knowledge which is indispensable in working with special artefacts (such as classified documents). Some museum staff saw volunteers as an intrusion into their personal space. These resistances were overcome after a common gathering was organised (informal socialising at various events).

In their interviews, the employees did not explicitly mention distrust; instead, they referred to their lack of time as the obstacle to getting involved with volunteers. In their view, the lack of expert knowledge was the most frequent barrier. Interviews have shown that more individual work with single volunteers would be needed. An efficient educational method would be personal coaching, for which the staff need enough time. But they do not have time for this type of work, therefore introducing volunteers would require different organisation of work. They also mention unfamiliarity with the "culture of the organisation", i.e. the tacit knowledge which is the basis of quick routine operation in an organisation, as an obstacle. Their personal view is important. If they see volunteers as their helpers (rather than as competitors for their job), they are satisfied with the cooperation and

develop closer relationships. The paragraph below shows some reservations towards volunteers.

"Of course, mediators can be of help, I say, in such, I would say, expert works, but we should in a way treat them as helpers and not as the final performers of these particular processes. This is very important, since although they can be valuable partners, at the same time they can also cause some damage, [...] actually because of their ignorance, can't they." [Other museum staff, The Slovenian ethnographic museum, 2012, Int. 15].

This project again confirmed the experience that employees in cultural institutions show initial reservations (even disapproval). Generally their explanation goes that the staff are not familiar enough with older adults and that older adults lack expert knowledge. From discussions it can be understood that the staff experts who were not included in the project fear that, with the inclusion of volunteers, the quality of their own expert work in the museum would diminish.

Obstacles to greater inclusion included the following:

-Museum staff's lack of time (with their regular work, they cannot get involved in training volunteers), mentors assume the task at their own initiative and no restructuring of their workload is foreseen, so they are overburdened;

-Volunteers lack the relevant expert knowledge (work is unsuitable for the volunteers, who cannot help, since they are not specialists);

-Situational obstacles (nobody asked them, the volunteers were not interested).

All these reasons demonstrate a need for management in volunteerism to organise the volunteers' work in a way to develop complementary roles of older volunteers, ongoing evaluation and efficient work coaching for volunteers. Moreover, they also demonstrate deficient knowledge of the role of older adult volunteers.

4.4 Understanding the Importance of the Project

All the interviewees are of the opinion that it is difficult to assess how a project is going to develop and how many volunteers would be necessary. U3A staff, authors of the project, pointed out that abroad, older volunteering in museums is a well-adopted, though a much different practice.

"Well, volunteering, as I see it, is a culturally based activity. It depends on the culture of the receiving institution, the culture of the staff, the culture of the volunteer and also the social value of volunteering. Well, at Slovenian Third Age University we know a lot about it. And I think that museums, also, depend on both culture and society. [...] We can see that in France, for instance, where socio-cultural animation has been developed into a true sub-system of cultural policy. You know, museums belong to people." [U3A staff, 2014, Int. 18].

Volunteers think that the development of voluntary work largely depends on the institution and their staff. They claim that volunteering is for them a possibility to intensify their feelings of usefulness and self-confidence. It is also a possibility to enlarge their social network. They can learn, gain and construct new knowledge, entail new activities, but the future of the project depends mostly on the institutional interest.

Mentors have established that the museum staff should be animated to get to know the opportunities arising from the inclusion of older adult volunteers. Some staff (not directly included in the project) thought that there was no need for volunteers in certain areas. One should pay enough attention to volunteers (the time spent), while in some phases of the work volunteers are a disturbance. They are of the opinion that volunteers' participation is unreliable, because they are free regarding their time and the way they work (they are without any obligations). The opinions of the participants in our study therefore vary. Volunteers estimate that more cultural mediators would increase the quality of work while the staff members / those who are not included remain reserved.

5. Conclusion

This research contributes new findings on how older adults' formally organised volunteering—cultural mediating and education for their volunteering—in a post-communist country is being felt. The findings are linked to the following concepts: active ageing, volunteering, new social roles and education of older people.

The main findings of this research agree with those of other studies (such as Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Warburton et al., 2007; Komp et al., 2012), arguing that productive activities, such as volunteering in cultural organisations, are positively experienced by older adult volunteers. The results of this research demonstrate that the experience of the participants in the project and educational programme were positive, while those of the museum staff, who did not participate in the project and the educational programme for volunteering of older people were not. The barriers concerning volunteering mentioned by non-participating museum staff are

connceted with stereotypes about older people. Some museum staff were hesitant towards voluntary work because they either feared that damage would occur (on the grounds that volunteers lack expert knowledge), or they were anxious that free voluntary work would replace salaried employees. When introducing education for volunteers, special attention should be paid to the perception of the organisation's employees.

Another finding of this research is that formally organised older people's voluntary work, not well developed in Slovenia, is active ageing in its own right. The motivation of the participants in the project is meeting their socio-psychological needs. Volunteering in museums enables new social roles for older people, resulting from older people's higher psychosocial needs (e.g. the need to belong), and not from the needs of the market.

Given the experience of all those who participated in voluntary work in museums as well as the above mentioned characteristics of the ageing Slovenian and European population, formally organised voluntary cultural mediating in cultural institutions is a model suitable for different groups, on condition introductory education on volunteering takes place. The implications of this research are in the continuation of the development of models of formally organised volunteering and education for organised volunteering.

The limitations of this research are as follows. The findings are limited in reference to the phenomenological qualitative methodology that was used, so it can serve as a starting point for further research of older people's volunteering, using also a quantitative research paradigm. All findings can be included in the planning of new programmes for the education of older adult volunteers in formal organisational settings. The findings can be used to understand educational needs and ensure "informed" decision-making when planning educational programmes.

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