

Youth's Perception on the Impact and Meaning of Working with Children

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored, from the perspectives of a group of young adults, the meaning and benefits derived from their experiences of helping children in a service-learning program. The study interviewed 120 young adults between the ages of 19-25 in ten focus groups. Set in a service-learning program at a university in Hong Kong, each participant had engaged in at least 30 hours of service work with children in the last two year prior to being interviewed. Two major themes have emerged from this study - 1) volunteers have identified what they have gained through their experiences of working with children, and 2) the reflections they have made on their own life as a result of the experiences gained from helping the children. Implications are directed towards capitalizing on these reflections as an effective way to foster a positive developmental trajectory for young adults, as they emerge out of adolescence into adulthood.

Keywords: Conceptions of childhood; Emerging adulthood; Qualitative; Working with children

Introduction & Literature Review

Relationship between Childhood and Adulthood

In a world characterized largely by a hierarchy of adult dominance over the child, and the eradication of the "child" self to make way for the emergence of the "adult" self under pressures of the society, it is no wonder that the philosophy of childhood is often questioned as children are treated and perceived as less than a "complete" and "full" human, a quality only considered to be possessed by adults [1]. It is in this society that child development is condemned and dictated to follow along a path towards developing into a "complete human", i.e. into an adult. What then is the relationship between one's childhood and adulthood? Is it a contrast to adulthood or a continual? [2] The very nature of childhood is also often a topic of academic debate. What is a child? A child is sometimes considered to be the unity of self and nature, as represented by one's desire to play, seek pleasure, co-ordinate thinking directly with action, and represented by one's ability to see the parallel lines between one's own boundary and the boundary of the outer world, which allows the child an exclusive window of opportunity to embrace nature and freedom to construct subjectivity [2]. The view of a child being a "limited" or an "incomplete" human being, that is, until the shedding or abandonment of the "child" self to make way for the "adult" self is therefore a line of inquiry worth pursuing. Adopting a macro-lens, tinted with the perspectives and concepts of the Social Sciences, the relationship between a child and an adult can be examined by considering the modes of childrearing. When we face or confront a child, we are in fact confronted by an instinctual demand to either "project" our adult unconsciousness and repressed materials to the child, or be "reactive" to the child as if they were the substitute of an adult figure important to the adult's own childhood. Alternatively, one can be "empathetic" to the child and exercise our innate ability to withdraw from either "projective" or "reactive" responses to be neutral in the face of confrontation; thus, perceiving and reacting to the child just as he/she is [2].

Past psycho-historical studies have proposed that the modes of childrearing throughout human history have evolved from infanticidal, abandoning, ambivalent, intrusive, socializing, and helping approaches [3,4]. Taken together as a comprehensive account of the historical, cultural, and evolutionary developments in understanding childrearing modes, in a historic-socio context, an increased empathetic

development of the adult and society towards the child can be observed over time. The significance of this development lied in the increased appreciation and consideration to re-integrate the abandoned "child" self into adulthood; providing the impetus for the children's rights movements and advocacy, and encouraging the importance of seeing and treating children simply as they are [2]. Extracting from this succinct interpretation of past studies, we, in the postmodern era, are confronted by a unique alternative to perceiving the development from childhood to adulthood, that is, as an integrative process involving the co-existence of different "selves" into one integrated "self"; in addition to the infanticidal or splitting-off of the "child" self to become an adult which parallels an ego fragmentation.

Mirroring this postmodern conception is the Psychodynamic School, which pays special attention to the link between childhood and adulthood. The Psychodynamic School examines the personality anxiety characteristic of the link between the two with concepts that adhere to the perspective of an ongoing conflict between instinct (child) and repression (educated adults) [5]. It sees the first six years of childhood as being the most important developmental period of one's entire lifetime. Furthermore, taking from theories in Psychology again, the Attachment theory links the childhood and adulthood as a continual, rather than separate, entity and the Mary Main's Adult Attachment Interview has become one of the common therapeutic methods used to heal the childhood wounds of adults [6]. The late modern to postmodern period era therefore serves as our intellectual 'enlightenment', providing us insight that prompts us to turn back to the children, conceiving and treating them as whole individuals with rights and worth. Even in adulthood, one can still learn from the children we care for and learn from the reflections of our own childhood, for that is how we achieve a new self-understanding of what it really means to

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be an 'adult'. Ultimately, a re-constructed view on childhood – one that respects the autonomy and inherent authentic values of the children and includes the “child” self as an integral part of the plurality of different selves – presents us with the opportunity to strive for an alternate vision of a more integrated society, i.e. one that includes the plurality of cultures, classes, and abilities [7]. This serves as the main theoretical backup for group matching in volunteerism, matching a large group of young adult volunteers with children to work together in a project. Just as young adults are in transition to adulthood, then, if indeed there is a linkage between childhood and adulthood, there must also be one between childhood and emergent adulthood [8,9].

The driving force behind the present study was the need to capture the link between childhood and adulthood through a close examination of a group of volunteers who work with underprivileged children. As an explorative, qualitative study, specific interest was placed in assessing the impact of matching young university students with children to work on a project together. The goal was to explore how volunteers reflected on their own experiences when working with the children. Since all the reflections are done in a group setting, instead of an experimental setting, and without a control group to compare to, we will only draw conclusions based on the cognitive and explicit outcomes from the respondents' verbatim. We will not attempt to draw conclusions based on any kind of emotional and implicit psychological interpretation.

Assessing the impact of working with children on volunteers

This study has specifically arranged five groups of young people to be volunteers and to serve different groups of children as service-recipients. Consulting previous research, volunteers from different age groups attach different meanings to volunteering and have different motivations to volunteer [10]. The nature of the volunteer work and the special characteristics of the service-recipients will also prompt differential personal growths and life reflections of the volunteers. It is during the transition of adolescence to young adulthood that a person is at his/her “ripest” to develop an altruistic identity. Previous research has also found that volunteering has a positive impact on youths' success in school, as it helped reduce several behavior-related problems, such as drug abuse, violent outbursts and behavioral tendencies, and early pregnancy [11]. The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between youth volunteers and their experiences while serving younger children.

A brief review of literature on this topic will yield many therapeutic models and concepts on adults revisiting their childhood experiences as effective ways to achieve growth and freedom from their childhood wounds [12-14]. This research study focused on how a group of young adults naturally reflected on their own experiences while working with and helping children. The study specifically chose several groups of university students who are not pursuing majors in the Social Science discipline, especially Social Work or Counselling, so as to ensure that they are, at least academically, not familiar with concepts that elucidate the linkage between childhood and their present life.

All respondents therefore shared the following common background: they were non-Social Science students, they volunteered in a university social service program to help children from underprivileged families (single-parent families, new arrival families, and low-income families who could not afford after-school activities), and they volunteered on a regular basis (once a week, for 2-3 hours, is considered regular) with an accumulated average of 30 hours of volunteer work each. The volunteer service structured the students to serve over 13 weeks, i.e. one whole academic semester in the university. Although the university offers a

number of children-related voluntary services, the students involved in this study only participated in one volunteer service; i.e. the one discussed about in this study.

The two main questions driving this inquiry were:

1. What are the volunteers' actual experiences working with these children?
2. What are the impacts of the experiences working with the children on the volunteers, in terms of self-development, life goals, life philosophy, etc.? How do volunteers link the relationship with children when volunteering to their self-concept?

Methodology

Study design and sample

From 2010 to 2012, the researcher of this project (also the author of this manuscript) conducted ten focused group meetings with 120 volunteers (N = 120; 75 females and 45 males) who were involved with the aforementioned volunteer program. Each group has 10-13 (four groups with 13 members, five groups with 10 members, and two groups with nine members) participants, aged from 19-25. All of the student participants were of Chinese ethnicity. They had all accomplished more than 30 hours of volunteer work in one semester, and all were serving on a regular basis. The focused group interview was conducted after the volunteer service concluded; that is, after they accumulated more than 30 hours of volunteer work. Each focused group interview lasted for two hours on average. The interview was guided by the following four open-ended questions:

1. What is your involvement in the project and who are your service-target groups?
2. What is your experience so far? Are there any impressive experiences?
3. Do you think the volunteering experience had an impact on your life goals, perspectives, values, and other-related thinking?
4. What is your future plan (i.e. in the next academic year) in this project?

Content of the interviews were analyzed into two broad themes, 1) The respondents' experience of working with the children; and 2) The respondents' perception of the relationship between working with children, and its impact on their self-development, goals, and values.

Thematic analysis method was utilized for analyzing the content of the interviews. The reason for using thematic analysis was because classification of responses enabled us to explore the relationships between the themes that surfaced, thus facilitating the building of a theory in further studies [15,16]. Both positive and negative feedbacks, focusing on the two broad themes, were reported from the participants. Firstly, the full sets of transcripts, including all the verbatim responses from the 10 focused groups, were read by two invited raters who were trained in the field of Social Science. They both had extensive research experience; one possessed a Master's degree and the other possessed a PhD degree. Secondly, each rater worked individually to distill all the verbatim responses which related closely to the research themes. Thirdly, only commonly chosen verbatim responses were adopted for further analysis. Fourthly, the two raters worked individually to assign each verbatim to either one of the two themes. Fifthly, the two raters met to discuss and compromise on which theme each verbatim

response should be assigned to. As the two raters were trained in the Social Sciences and competent on the use of Qualitative research methodologies, the degree of agreement between the two raters was high. There were no instances of strong disagreements between the two raters. To facilitate the effectiveness and efficiency of the data analysis, although one verbatim response might have carried on more than one theme, each of them was placed under one main theme only and the raters had to debate for the best representative theme for each verbatim response. At this stage the two raters agreed to assign 42 verbatim responses to theme one, and 37 verbatim responses to theme two. The assigned verbatim responses under different themes were further studied and labeled as types of responses under a theme by the researcher, who is also the author of this manuscript. At last, under the first theme of volunteers' experiences of working with children, five types of experiences were identified. Under the second theme on the impact of working with the children on the volunteers' self, values, and life philosophy, three types of impacts were identified.

Data Analysis

All of the participants were able to answer the open-ended questions. Most of the reflections were rather positive, with none definitely being negative. A few responses were viewed as skeptical, while others were taken as inquisitive reflections. The responses were categorized into two main themes – their experiences of working with children in general, and the impact working with children had on their personal life philosophy. For each type of experience and impact under the two themes, only two verbatim responses will be presented as representations in the following analysis.

Theme one: What are the volunteers' experiences of working with children?

Gaining an Understanding about the Nature of Children: All adults were once children, but this carries no promise that all adults understand children. The experiences of working with children helped volunteers gain important insights about the nature of children. The experiences also raised questions about their own pre-conceptions of children, which were never uncovered. First-hand working experience with the children made them aware of their biases and, as shown in the first verbatim below, helped them become more flexible for the future. Other volunteers were able to see more in-depth about the complex nature of children – that they are truly sensitive, playful, creative, and capable of acting appropriately even when they are confused, as shown typically in the second verbatim below.

"I lack experience and do not know how to get along with children. After this tutoring experience, children are not as hard to communicate with as I thought."

"A child asked me if the existence of God was real. I answered that if you believe it exists, then it exists; and if not, then it does not exist. The child said he believes that it exists but why he could not see it. I did not know how to answer him but I realized that a child can be very active in asking questions and searching for answers."

Questioning and Uncovering some Pre-Conceptions about Children: A more comprehensive understanding of the nature of children was achieved through re-vising some core pre-conceptions of a "problematic" child. It is easy to label a child's behavior and it is even easier to label a child as being "problematic". Through serving children, volunteers became aware of some underlying issues of "problematic" children or just about children in general. This helped them eliminate labels they held about children who needed help. Furthermore, the

volunteers achieved a deeper understanding about the nature of children, as represented below.

"After serving some emotional children, I realized the meaning of tolerance and the importance of endurance. I cannot ask an emotional child to change within one day, so I have to be patient."

"I work with two brothers from a single-parent family and both of them are very unhappy. I always worry about them. One day, I saw that they were playing happily outside. I realized that they might not be very good in studying, but they still have their own world and strengths. I learned to see deeper than superficial things."

Enhancement of Values towards Children: Some volunteers were able to clearly connect their own experiences with their own belief system; sometimes able to connect with the children; and maybe towards mankind as a whole. A significant number of these values were labeled, such as respect for children, seeing from a child's perspective, and not judging a child in the capacity of someone who has never been in those positions and/or situations. These volunteers were able to deepen their understanding on working with children through their empathy. They were able to see the world "through the children's eyes", and were able to develop sensitivities and values crucial to establishing a trusting and open relationship with children. As illustrated in the last quote, the more "layered" observations are often generated by using the ability to see the issues(s) from various angles, as well as adopting a human-in-environment approach, as shown below.

"We should treat kids respectfully and on equal levels. I learned that if I knelt down and talked to them, then I could connect with them much better."

"I mentored a boy who is 15 and has already stopped school. He made many friends playing online-games, but barely had any REAL friends. I remember when I was at this age I had great fun in school. I was close with my family. Then I realized that there are children who do not experience what I had experienced. Our expectations need to be different given their background."

Gaining New Skills to Relate Better to Children: The quotes below reflect the importance of volunteer work as "an action of helping" and the process of gaining new skills has opened them up to facilitate better communications with the children; thus, resulting in a more rewarding experience. This group of volunteers generated substantial skills relating to children, including playing and competing with them, actively listening to them, using memories and imaginations to understand them, and realizing that a genuine relationship with children is more effective than simply giving instructions. The two representative quotes are as follows.

"I was helping a boy who would never sit still until one day I told him that he has to compete with me to finish something, he then sat down and tried to win me. I realized that I should think of many ways to understand a child, and not just instruct them."

"Previously, I strongly focused on their school work. Often, they became less focused. I asked a kid why and he said I was pushing him too hard or I taught him something beyond his ability. Later on, I talked with him more and learned that developing a good relationship is also vital."

Skeptical Ideas about Helping Children: A few of the volunteers shared their skepticism about helping children, which can be seen as an inquisitive learning process rather than outright negative experiences. Developing a critical mind about children was found to be a sub-

theme of experiences which cannot be ignored among this group of volunteers.

"I am very skeptical of the usefulness of tutoring children with their homework. Their goal of coming to the group is to get the homework done and I am questioning whether it is really useful to them. I started to wonder how I should care for a child, and what is good or bad for the child?"

"My mentee never asked any questions and I do not really believe that he wants to come on his own will. If he comes only because he is asked to, then what should I do?"

Theme two: What are the impacts of the experiences of working with children on volunteers' own life goal and philosophy?

Reflecting on One's Own Relationships: This is the most "therapeutic" type among all the other types identified – that through interacting and helping children, some volunteers were able to gain awareness and reflect on the difficulties of their own past relationships with their own families. Through the process of self-reflection, they were inspired to work on changing challenging relationships at present or in the future.

"My mother passed away when we were young and we were taken care of by a distant auntie who is a friend of my mother. We were indebted to her. Without her, we may have wandered astray. However, I had been receiving this auntie's help in a very passive way and do not know how to show her my gratitude. Now, I know I have to be more active and self-directed. I will tell her I am very thankful and I will show her that I will take care of my sister too. She will be very happy to see it."

"I noticed something about my young brother when I got along with the children. My brother is 10 and younger than my two service targets. I usually think I know my brother well - I am his sister and there should be nothing that I would not know. When I began to work with children, I started to pay more attention to their emotions. I started to question why did the children have such responses? When I asked them a question, why were they answering me in such a way? What did they really mean behind their speech? So I used that kind of awareness to understand my brother. I no longer blamed my brother directly when he could not concentrate. I am more willing to hear from my brother. I started to play with him, hoping to build a better relationship. I reflected that I was not always right. This creates room to understand my brother. There may even be a sensible reason behind his temper sometimes."

Reflecting On and Understanding One's Own Development: Through working with children, some of the volunteers were able to gain a sense of awareness about oneself, to develop deeper self-knowledge – e.g. realizing they are impatient, they are spending too much time on leisure activities that do not advance their goals, and/or that they should take more initiative, etc. They also realized that they acted and felt differently when they felt needed. This self-understanding covers a wide scope of self-development perspectives, and seems to serve as very important ingredients for one's personal development.

"I was a very impatient person and would give up easily if things did not go my way. I worked with a team of volunteers serving a group of children. I started to realize that if we do not co-operate well, we will be a very bad role-model to the children, and thus will not be able to help our children make changes in their lives. I also realized that my impatience stems from the little time that my parents spare to listen to me, as they were always very busy."

"I have learnt to take more initiative after having worked with

the children. I will call my friends and suggest having dinner with them. I used to rely on my friends on this before. Our friendship has strengthened a lot as a result. My mother also sees the change in me. I am more active in expressing my thankfulness to her. My mom thinks I have grown up."

Developing One's Life Philosophy through Volunteering Experiences: Volunteers were able to develop a wide range of insights including, but not limited to: acknowledging and accepting the reality of life, the definition of and balance between independent and seeking help (which is commonly a difficult task for everyone), interdependence-related issues among people, exploring the meaning of sacrifice, and exploring the meaning of teaching and helping. These volunteers had derived a pretty deep understanding of life from their volunteering experiences, and connected the experiences with the meaning of life.

"I helped a child who experienced domestic violence before. He was very naughty and a trouble-maker. After getting to know him personally, he could be very lovely; although he is always rebellious. I started to understand him more. However, the social worker then instructed me to not spoil him and to set some expectations of him. I learnt to not only act from my feelings for the child, but also to implement methods that are useful to the boy. Before, life to me was very straight-forward and linear. Now, it is more complex. I learned to be very dynamic and knowledgeable. That also became my life philosophy."

"I was brought up to live and work independently and our family relationships were very loose. After serving the children, I realized that independence is not at the expense of good relationships with people. When facing difficulties before, I thought independence meant to handle everything all by myself. Now, I realize that I can seek help and offer help - while still being independent."

Conclusion

The unique background of the university volunteer project for and by a group of university students had provided us with a special social environment to study volunteerism and to understand young adults. The project was supported by a big pool of relatively homogenous volunteers with similar ages, educational backgrounds, and motivations. This thus helped make our group of respondents relatively homogenous. From conceptualizing the respondents as young adults, and towards finally measuring the outcomes, the study has rendered our practice-based research with evidence to suggest that our respondents share special developmental needs, for example the need to revise pre-conceptions of children and reflect on one's own childhood. Through this endeavor, moreover, the findings seem to be supportive of our assertion that the youth age group is best suited for the purpose of this study; i.e. to study their unique reflections from interacting with children in needs. Through systematic data collection and an open-ended explorative method, the unique experiences respondents gained from working with children are elucidated. If not subject to a qualitative study, it is probable that such valued findings would be easily ignored. The above findings have provided us with important pointers – suggesting the benefits of integrating aforementioned concepts and practices into future volunteer projects; especially after considering the evidence of how young adults are benefiting in their own developmental processes when they have a chance to extensively interact with children. As transition periods can be seen as turning points for positive change in the subsequent stages of the developmental pathway [17], the process of serving and working with underprivileged children can help both the children and young adults to negotiate transitions successfully. The connection drawn between the two groups in this study capitalized on the belief that young adults who

have just experienced childhood and adolescence themselves would have “a well of coping reserve” that is relevant to working with children and youth. Through working with children, young adults were also able to have a correctional experience on their own childhood trauma and/or negative experiences, thus allowing a reconstruction of their own narrative. Furthermore, the integration of children and emerging adults in services has provided a platform for the conglomeration and dynamic interactions of the different developing selves – forming a “pluralism of (ego) relationships rather than an organization constituted by exclusions and hierarchies” [18]. The findings from this group of young adult volunteers, delineated from their experiences working with children, can be extended to other volunteer groups or service-recipients to explore their specific linkages. For example, what are the benefits of measuring young adults’ perception when volunteering with an elderly group, or with people living with disabilities? Apart from matching developmental benefits according to age groups, the concepts can be extended to groups identified by gender, cultural background, and specific life experiences. As the findings support the benefits of implementing service-learning programs in settings of higher education, with a particular focus on university students working with children, the matching concept derived has also paved the way for the expansion of volunteer management options and strategies grounded in developmental-oriented theoretical underpinnings. The findings of the study also carry implications that extend beyond the discourse of volunteerism to the practice of psychotherapy and the developmental concerns of the evolving self. Taken together, by creating a space and opportunity for the young adults to care and to learn from interacting with children, youth will gain a better understanding of the society and their selves in the society.

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