

Participation Among Marginalized Young People in Brazil: Using Action Research to Support Subjective Well-Being in Volunteering

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People have recognized the intrinsic value of informal exchanges of time, energy, and resources for creating a social context that supports human well-being. Attempts to harness these benefits by nongovernment and government agencies have led to the organization of structured platforms to nurture voluntary acts of public service and pro-social behavior. The instrumental value of volunteering remains a debated topic warranting investigation of the relationship between volunteering, well-being and active citizenship. A growing body of evidence in the western world suggests that positive mental states and good functioning often precede and help to cause good outcomes; that while it is possible for volunteering opportunities to feed an upward spiral of advantages for the individuals involved, they can also exacerbate inequalities between individuals. Using the concept of subjective well-being and action research as method, the paper explores ways of working with the dynamic nature and unequal distribution of subjective well-being to support the participation of marginalized groups.

Keywords: *subjective well-being, volunteering, participation, active citizenship, action research, complex adaptive systems*

Introduction

As far back as Aristotle, people have recognized the intrinsic value of informal exchanges of time, energy, and resources for creating a social context that supports human well-being (Stephens, Ryan-Collins & Boyle, 2008). There is now a wealth of social science research linking

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volunteering and active participation in community life to subjective well-being (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004).

Understood broadly as the experience of doing well and feeling good, subjective well-being has been shown to be improved by volunteering in four key ways: promoting positive feelings, improving psychological functioning, protecting mental health, and improving life expectancy (Aked, 2011). These developments in the science of well-being have confirmed the wisdom long espoused by philosophical and religious traditions the world over: the human capacity for compassion and cooperation is a fundamental feature of our nature, from which we derive significant well-being benefits (Bok, 2010). The enthusiasm on the part of researchers to demonstrate the importance of looking after others to look after ourselves has tended to generate lines of inquiry seeking to chart a linear, cause-effect relationship between the act of volunteering and the subsequent benefits that flow to the volunteer.

This has been useful for groups advocating the design of social, economic and governance systems that encourage citizens to play an active role in improving the lives of others. Attempts to harness these benefits by nongovernment and government agencies have typically led to the organization of structured platforms to nurture voluntary acts of public service and pro-social behavior. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are concerned with increasing the agency of citizens to challenge exclusionary practices and bring about change (The Citizenship Development Research Centre, 2011, p. 4). Governments interested in volunteering and active citizenship are often looking to reform the relationship between the State and its citizenry. Through promoting increased personal and social responsibility, the aim is to challenge the perception that government is the main agent of change. Whether referred to as social activism, active citizenship or civic engagement, the broad aim is for citizens to supplement or complement the efforts of the State by playing an active part in the development of themselves and others.

However, the instrumental value of collective activity, as a strategy for achieving specific socioeconomic development outcomes, including an engaged citizenry, remains a debated topic. The mere existence of volunteering opportunities cannot be equated with positive impacts – either in terms of improving subjective well-being or in terms of creating a civil society that works for the public interest (Aked, 2011; Schaaf, 2010). The very fact that opportunities to behave in pro-social and compassionate ways *can* give rise to positive outcomes, including sustained active citizenship, does not mean that they *always* do. For example, a recent review of existing literature carried out for United Nations Volunteers

(UNV) found examples where volunteering can have negative impacts through creating role strain and conflict for the volunteer and reinforcing inequalities (Aked, 2011). Examination of the relationship between volunteering, well-being and social change seems warranted to improve understanding about how opportunities for voluntary activities can be used effectively as a tool for development (UNV, 2011).

This article will focus on two mediating factors not often emphasized in research exploring the relationship between volunteering and well-being: the dynamic nature and unequal distribution of subjective well-being. It will look at recent developments in the conceptualization of subjective well-being which emphasize its characteristics as an emergent property of a complex and adaptive system before exploring what this means for the distribution of subjective well-being within a population. Finally, it will discuss how the distribution of subjective well-being influences those who feel able to engage with opportunities for voluntary activities. To explore how consideration of these factors can be accommodated in community development programs, the article will highlight the learning of a global action research project facilitated by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) in the UK to support entrepreneurship in local economies (see <http://www.pluggingtheleaks.org>).

An Action Research Approach

The use of action research as a methodology is a significant step in well-being and volunteering research. To date, researchers have remained fairly attached to the prevailing tendency in social scientific research to use data to demonstrate that x leads to y rather than to understand what happens and why (O'Hara & Lyon, forthcoming). The approach has been to seek reductionist, linear cause and effect explanations about the relationship between variables like volunteering to well-being, largely ignoring its emergent or embodied nature and dissuading critical engagement with its complexity. As such, a big knowledge gap remains about how to harness subjective well-being to improve the effectiveness with which international development efforts support positive outcomes for communities and societies (Bellagio Initiative, 2012), especially as concrete challenges are worked through in practice. The pairing of well-being and social change research is a recent and emergent interest (Biswas-Diener, 2011), especially as policymakers have begun asking what a well-being approach to welfare provision or national development looks like (Legatum Commission on Wellbeing Policy, 2012; Royal Government of Bhutan, 2012).

As well as offering a fresh and welcome perspective to the study of well-being through its rejection of positivism (O'Hara & Lyon, forthcoming), a key strength of the action research approach for the subject matter of this article is the explicit link between the action research process and changing things for the better (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). This is typically an intention of voluntary activity and intrinsic to the study of well-being, which by its very emphasis is about what works. There is also good alignment between the commitment of action researchers to working in a participatory way (Burns, 2007; Burns, 2012) and what is known in the positive psychology and behavioral change literature about the contexts and ways of working that enable well-being enhancing experiences (Ryan, 2009; Biswas-Diener & Patterson, 2011). For example, the emphasis on learning through doing in action research chimes with research (Aked & Stephens, 2009) and theoretical models (Psychosocial Assessment of Development and Humanitarian Interventions [PADHI], 2009) which emphasize that subjective well-being has to be *actively* achieved.

A central component of the learning architecture of this project was an international learning network, of which the author of this article and the secretary general of *The Associação de Apoio à Criança em Risco* (ACER, Children at Risk Foundation), were members (Prattein, 2010). ACER has been working since 1993 in Eldorado, Diadema in Brazil, a metropolitan area characterized by high levels of social exclusion, poor performance on child development indicators and the highest crime rates in the country.

The NGO aims to promote transformation of the social environment in order that it can better support the rights of children and young people. To achieve these organizational objectives, ACER has been working with members of the community to explore the fundamental components of a local economy that support sustainable livelihoods (Prattein, 2010). By encouraging social activism, the aim of the organization is to develop intra-community capacity to support local economic development.

In one strand of its work with NEF's global action research project, ACER created the Teen Action Project in August 2010 to support marginalized young people to become active contributors to the economic, social and environmental well-being of their community. In this article, the distinctiveness of its approach and associated learning points are explored through the prism of well-being research in an effort to unpick the sequencing of psychological and social processes that enabled the young people to participate.

The Dynamic Nature of Subjective Well-Being

At its most fundamental, well-being is about lives going well. In simple terms, it has been described as being about feeling good and doing well (Huppert, 2008). Importantly, this means that when advocates call for well-being to be taken seriously, they are not only concerned with social protection or the realization of rights. They are also interested in well-being as a resource enabling people to shape a more positive future. The academic literature provides a number of different accounts which emphasize different components of subjective well-being (Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2006; Vittersø, in press; Huppert, 2008):

Meeting people's basic needs, often defined as a minimum set of objective conditions

Positive feelings and / or judgments that life is going well, emphasizing subjective reports

Living well, looking at the way people interact with the world in a way which leads to healthy social and psychological functioning

It is often thought that these different approaches to understanding subjective well-being are in competition with one another (The Centre for Well-being - NEF, 2011). This tension often sits at the heart of debates about whether it is more accurate to refer to people's "well-being" or their "happiness." But if we consider how we think about well-being in our day-to-day lives, we often combine some practical considerations (such as health and financial issues) with feelings and thoughts about how things are going. And we often position our own well-being in relation to our personal experience of relationships, friendships and community.

In a piece of work for the UK Foresight Programme of the Government Office of Science in 2008, NEF developed the dynamic model of well-being, shown in Figure 1 (Thompson & Marks, 2008). In its attempt to integrate the wealth of empirical evidence on well-being into one model, the authors found it most useful to think of subjective well-being as an emergent property of a dynamic system with distinct elements influencing one another (Thompson & Marks, 2008).

The model describes how individuals' external conditions – such as their income, employment status, housing and social context – act together with their personal resources – such as health, optimism and resilience – to allow them to function well in the world. The extent to which our

Figure 1. NEF's Dynamic Model of Well-being

Source: Thompson & Marks, 2008, p. 12.

experience of life is characterized by positive emotions (e.g., happiness, joy, love) as well as an overall sense that we are satisfied is dependent upon good functioning and the realization of physical, social and psychological needs. These key components seem to broadly apply to people from across different cultures (Tay & Diener, 2007).

The model shows some important feedback loops (the downward arrows). One indicates how experiences build resources, making people more ready to take advantage of opportunities in our external environment to develop and flourish. The other one indicates how people who function well – with a sense that their actions are self-directed, effective and in strong social networks – are better at shaping their environments. They explain a growing body of studies showing that positive mental states and good functioning often precede and help to cause good outcomes, like health, education, employment and pro-environmental behavior (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Losada & Heaphy, 2004; Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). In effect, the model is describing well-being as a complex and adaptive system. It is the interrelationship between connected parts which explains the outcome of a 'disturbance' to the system, such as an opportunity to volunteer. The feedback loops in Figure 1 can begin to explain the bi-directionality which

can be observed when reviewing a range of separate studies examining the relationship between volunteering and well-being. On the one hand, we know that the act of volunteering can help improve people's self-esteem and sense of self-worth (Post, 2005). It can also foster a sense of control and a sense of purpose (Van Willigen, 2000). This is because when people feel they have something to offer, it makes them feel of value (Volunteer Match, 2010). Children and young people also do better when they feel they can usefully contribute to society (Aked, Steuer, Lawlor & Spratt, 2009). There are also important social spill-over effects of voluntary and participatory behaviors: volunteers who are more likely to develop "civic skills" attach more importance to serving the public interest as a personal life goal, and are more politically active (Wilson, 2000).

Looked at from the other perspective, people who self-report positive happenings and feelings are more likely to participate in the first place. One study indicates that for people to decide to give their time for free they need to believe "they have something to give" or that "they can make a difference" (Wilson & Musick, 1999). The likelihood of people remaining in volunteer work has also been shown to relate to the amount of time volunteers spend interacting informally (e.g., talking with friends, neighbors and acquaintances on the telephone) and formally (e.g., participation in meetings of clubs and societies and attendance at religious services) (Wilson & Musick, 1999). The relationships we have with others can help extend our motivation and attachment to volunteering. Perhaps they provide social support when times are difficult or raise the social costs of dropping out.

In this regard, subjective well-being is not just an outcome of volunteering. It is also an important resource that influences our willingness and resolve to participate. It is possible that attending to the psychological and social foundations of this dynamic relationship can improve the design of volunteer programs to engage citizens in the task of community development or nation-building.

The Inequality of Subjective Well-Being

If subjective well-being is an important resource, then what do we know about the way it is distributed? A World Health Organization (WHO) report on mental health, resilience and inequalities stated that the factors driving material and subjective well-being are not distributed equally among local populations (Friedli, 2009). As noted in a UK report:

Some individuals or groups live in better quality housing than others. Some have fewer money concerns. Some have stronger

support networks. Some feel valued, respected and included in society in a way that others do not (Local Government Improvement and Development, 2010, p. 11).

The very fact that well-being has social and psychological dimensions as well as material ones has prompted discussion about how to achieve more equal distribution of social determinants of health and well-being (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). It has been suggested that action is taken at a local level to identify inequalities of access to:

valued assets – which could include green space, financial credit, and volunteering opportunities;
opportunities to influence decisions on fair allocation of scarce resources – which points to good governance structures;
opportunities people have for valued roles and to make a meaningful contribution – which is aimed at tackling the psychological experience of being made to feel of no account as a poor, vulnerable or excluded group (Friedli, 2011).

Within the context of volunteering, a study looking at its impact at the personal and neighborhood level similarly found that the psychological and social resources are unequally distributed within and across communities (Mellor et al., 2009). Other psychological research has shown that when people feel that things are outside of their control, they feel helpless. This sense of helplessness can prevent people from taking action to change the situation (Dawnay & Shaw, 2005). Relatedly, efforts to encourage marginalized groups to participate have been criticized for failing to recognize both the insidious nature of power (Cooke & Kothari, 2001) and the relational nature of the participatory process (Mannion, 2010). Just as subjective well-being is influenced by structural and psychosocial factors (Aked, Steuer, Lawlor & Spratt, 2009), so is the act of participation influenced by the structural, historical, cultural, social and psychological context within which it occurs.

If we extrapolate from discrete volunteering transactions to consider a more systemic view of the impact of volunteering, we can see that initiatives to create volunteer opportunities have the potential to reinforce inequalities, depending on who takes them up. If the availability of social and psychological resources underpins a person's active participation with the community around him or her, this may explain why many initiatives are unable to engage the "hardest to reach" who lack a ready stock which they can mobilize in new and unfamiliar situations.

At the same time, the hidden subjective well-being advantages that enable a person to feel s/he has something to offer as a citizen are likely to translate into further personal benefits. For example, it has been shown that people who bring more resources and skills to their voluntary work are more likely to get rewarding tasks, which in turn motivate them to volunteer for a longer time (Wilson & Musick, 1999). Active engagement over the long term is likely to convey all sorts of additional advantages to the volunteer such as an understanding of the way the world works, stronger social networks and even social status (Gladwell, 2008).

Relatedly, the research shows that individuals derive greater well-being from helping than being helped (Oztop, Sener, Guven, & Dogan, 2009). It is also understood that efforts to improve welfare situations which transmit or reproduce stigma can negatively impact people's well-being by reducing self-respect, self-esteem, and dignity (Friedli, 2009). It is possible, therefore, that a fixed and inflexible distinction between "volunteer" and "recipient" may lead to well-being gains for the volunteer at the expense of well-being losses for the recipient. Current research carried out by the author is indicating this may come about where active planning and delivery roles for volunteers limit community members' participation to turning up and listening at events. The notion that volunteering "in mutuality" – where all parties are given the opportunity to feel useful, of value and purposeful – would be more effective for everybody's well-being is likely to present a challenge to the design of volunteering for development programs. For example, recent research into the characteristics of good capacity development has acknowledged that the invisible or "soft and intangible capacities", such as confidence and the capacity to establish relationships, are the most difficult to develop in change processes (Oswald & Clarke, 2010).

Supporting Marginalized Young People to Participate in Community Development: The Case of ACER's Teen Action Project in Brazil

Context

During its time working in Eldorado, Diadema over the past two decades, ACER noticed that by the age of 16 years most young people have to find a way to make a living. But before this age, they are largely overlooked within the community, despite having a lot of ideas and energy to contribute. Within Eldorado, there are very few projects run for the benefit of children or young people. Where they do have a project encouraging young people to play football, it is run by an adult.

As one strand of its work with NEF's global action research project to support entrepreneurship in local economies, a series of sharing sessions with the international learning network served as a space to simultaneously learn from existing research and iterative practice. This was done to incorporate insights from studies on subjective well-being into the design and implementation of the Teen Action Project. ACER started the Teen Action Project in August 2010 with the explicit aim of designing a program of activities to encourage social activism among marginalized young people.

Program Components

ACER's established access to young people through a local school. The project coordinator designed and co-facilitated with young people a series of workshops supporting the students to explore their own well-being. These spaces extended beyond consideration of livelihoods to incorporate a broader economic framework to facilitate thinking about the things that would bring well-being to themselves and to their community. The sessions also covered psychological and social well-being, the young people interdependence on others and nature, and their own capabilities to make changes that make a difference. Undertaken over a series of five days with classes of 30-40 students, the workshops were organized around five key themes (ACER Brasil, 2011a; ACER Brasil, 2011b):

- 1) Local economic development – where young people are encouraged to think about how money leaks out of their neighborhood and how the flow of money circulating in their community can be increased;
- 2) Mapping community assets – where young people identify what is positive in their neighborhood and school, reflect on what can be improved and identify ideas for action;
- 3) My sustainable school – where young people think about how their school and neighborhood can become more environmentally sustainable;
- 4) Five ways to wellbeing – where young people examine how their actions can influence the lives of others before identifying simple ways to be happy and contribute to the happiness of others; and
- 5) Executing ideas – where young people learn about the process of creating a personal or community-based project.

In the last session, students draw on the ideas that have been generated in the previous four workshops and work in groups to write a project plan. The young people are informed that ACER offers a coaching service to help with the development of their projects if they wish to take them forward. This is another key component of the project design, with ACER making the coach available at school during the morning break and at the ACER office to talk about possible projects. Since August 2010, ACER has worked with 650 young people aged 12-15. ACER has coached 80 students and a number of projects have been developed, including:

- Tree planting;
- Saturday night dances;
- An environmental film about a local reservoir;
- A competition between classes about cleaning up the school; and
- Students working as teaching assistants in math classes for younger teens.

Exploring Project Principles Through the Lens of Subjective Well-Being

A reflection session facilitated by this article's author with the secretary general, and appointed Teen Action Project coordinator and coach reviewed the principles of the approach after two years. The discussion explored the experiences of staff directly involved in its iterative design and implementation. These reflections on ACER's "ways of working" are related back to recent developments in the field of well-being research. Where relevant, key learning points are also described.

Staff were keen to point out that they consider an asset-based approach as central to achieving sustainable transformation in communities. Rather than starting with problems or deficits, asset-based approaches seek to build on the life experience, knowledge, skills, talents, energy and enthusiasm that people bring to a given situation (Aked & Stephens, 2009). With this approach at its foundation, the project adopted five main principles or ways of working.

Moving 'Beyond Voice' or Consultation into the Sphere of Action

Rather than design a project in consultation with the young people, ACER sought to develop the capacity of young people to design and run their own projects. The focus for the Teen Project is on unlocking the resourcefulness and creativity of the young people to be part of their own

solution, through direct experience. The workshops are a useful tool to get young people to think about the assets in their neighborhood, determine what could be changed for the better, and their role in making that change happen. But the main focus of the project is on supporting the young people to develop their own projects.

According to some studies, working in this way is a sound basis for improving subjective well-being. For example, the Psychosocial Assessment of Development and Humanitarian Interventions (PADHI) program of the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, maintains that well-being has to be *actively achieved* (PADHI, 2009). This means that well-being cannot be delivered *to* people. It is something that emerges from an individual's interactions with the world around them. It is why "functioning" – what people do – is a central component of NEF's dynamic model of well-being (see Figure 1). To convey the importance of this sense of agency, PADHI purposefully uses verbs ("doing" words) to describe the processes underpinning the experience of well-being (PADHI, 2009).

Building from Positive Experiences

During implementation of the Teen Action Project, ACER staff found that young people's engagement is almost never established through the identification of the project at the end of the fifth workshop. The working hypothesis is that when the young people write their project ideas, they work on ideas that they do not believe they can actually make happen. Being able to believe in themselves – and embrace the idea of setting up their own project – is highly dependent upon the young people having positive experiences. ACER has found that a critical experience to get right is the relationship the young people develop with the ACER coach.

Following the final workshop, the coach makes herself available to the young people in school breaks so they can establish contact on their terms – either because they enjoyed the workshops and/or want to get to know her a little better. Initial conversations with the young people tend to be about how they can potentially change things. Gradually, the conversation is focused on their specific project idea and why they would be able to make it happen. ACER has found that it is only through this informal relationship that the young people build confidence in the coach, build confidence in themselves and develop trust in the coach so they are not worried about making mistakes. The relationship is the basis of a positive experience that creates the inquiry space for action.

The act of having a positive experience elicits positive feelings. The *broaden-and-build* theory, put forward by Barbara Frederickson (1998), suggests that positive emotions trigger the *broadening* of attention and of

thinking. When we are in a comparatively favorable and safe context – and therefore are experiencing positive emotions – it is advantageous to explore, to play, to connect with others. Broadening helps identify new opportunities, and *builds* our resources. This includes physical resources (e.g. physical skills built through play), social resources (e.g., social networks and friendships through connecting with others), intellectual resources (e.g., knowledge through learning and heightened awareness) and psychological resources (resilience, optimism and creativity through reflection, savoring and thinking differently) (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005).

Working with People's Intrinsic Motivations

Rather than be prescriptive, ACER strives to work first and foremost with who people are and what they have energy for. Rather than present a list of possible ways to engage, ACER facilitates the thinking processes that help young people to form their own project idea. It is at this stage that young people self-select for coaching support. ACER has noticed that young people seem to find changing something in their community an easier starting place than changing something in their own lives. For example, no students have ever come up with projects to promote their own individual growth or development. The projects are always oriented to the school or wider community. ACER's working hypothesis is that the young people are not socially or culturally primed to have individual dreams or aspirations about the future.

ACER is starting to see that those students who take up the offer of coaching support to develop their projects gradually begin looking at their own lives during the process, and sometimes even take positive steps to improve them. This is supported by the fact that the project coordinator has observed some young people have gone on to pursue other activities outside of the project, "some of the young people are developing more for themselves."

Some have jobs at ACER. Another student has become very engaged with working to improve the library at the school.

According to psychological and neuroscience research (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Elliot & Deakin, 2008), the distinction between nurturing intrinsic motivations (e.g., intimate relationships, personal growth or contributing to one's community) versus extrinsic motivations has a significant impact on people's sense of well-being. Choosing behaviors that are consistent with one's needs, values and interests is important for rewarding and

enriching experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This could be because intrinsic goals are more conducive to satisfying core psychological needs to experience autonomy, competency and relatedness, which contribute to well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the context of active participation, research has found that volunteers motivated by intrinsic life goals are more likely to derive well-being benefits than those who engage for external reasons (e.g., external rewards, work experience, status) (Meier & Stutzner, 2006).

Inviting and Granting Permission to Act

An interesting feature of this project is the recruitment of four young people to co-deliver the series of workshops. It is a clear signal to the students at the outset that young people have something of value to contribute. One of the objectives of the workshops is to open up a space where the young people “feel free to dream”. The on-going coaching is not about giving advice to the young people or being an expert who can fix a glitch in the project design. It is about making the young people see their ideas come to life.

One of the challenges facing the young people is that they lack credibility in the eyes of school administrators and community leaders. As the coach reflects, “the young people are not listened to. Projects run by adults get much more attention.”

As a result, young people can end up feeling quite demoralized. While the coach can see a future where the young people have credibility, she is overcoming this interim challenge by either going with the young people to deal with bureaucratic issues or by acting as the “bridge” or “broker” between the young people and adults in position of influence.

As one example, after identifying that the school could be a barrier to young people developing their own projects, the ACER coach ran a series of the workshops with the staff to build a positive connection with the project. This experience has improved understanding and support for the project and points to the importance of ACER building positive relationships with people connected to the young people for the success of the project.

By handing control for outcomes over to the young people, the project is granting them ownership over the solutions to problems. Over time, the aim is to build a “can-do” attitude driven by a subjective sense of collective capacity, rather than dependency on externally-provided assistance.

Research has found that by involving people in equal and reciprocal relationships with professionals and others, in order to get things done, needs are better met (Boyle, Coote, Sherwood & Slay, 2010). It has been shown to support people's well-being by improving self-esteem, encouraging positive emotions, promoting engagement with local activities and supporting stronger social connections (Aked & Stephens, 2009).

However, the permission granted to young people to make the changes they want to see is testing local assumptions and worldviews about what young people are capable of and what their role in the community could be. ACER is finding that the current social arrangements and relationships are not set up to nurture the enthusiasm and energy of the young people, and that it will take time – perhaps many project cycles – to change this.

Creating Flexibility to Respond to Non-linear Journeys of Change

In response to the disconnect that is often witnessed between people's pathways around life and project delivery pathways, ACER tries to use tools and techniques that respect the different journeys of change that young people go through. As the coach points out, "every young person's journey is different."

The ongoing coaching is really important to help young people overcome set-backs, challenges, and their own lack of confidence. For example, ACER has noticed that in almost all the project groups, there is a point in time – usually just as the young people arrive at the stage of developing an idea and being almost ready to start – when they identify a number of reasons why their project will not be a success. The coach works with the young people to navigate the perceived and real barriers.

Sometimes these barriers emerge in the wider context of the project, outside the direct control of the young people or ACER. For example, in 2012 a rule came into force saying that schools were not allowed to form partnerships with NGOs any longer, without the project being formally approved at the state level. This change was implemented with little warning and prevented the coach from attending the school for a month. On her return, the young people did not respond as she thought saying "Oh, we are so glad you are back." Instead they asked "Why did you abandon us?" As it happened, the young people could not make sense of her absence as they were not informed about the new rule. In response, ACER is now working to identify a contact person *within* the school who can act as a liaison between the coach and the students. By creating a

structure that shares responsibility between ACER and the school for communicating important project messages, ACER can hopefully create resilience in the project design and mitigate the negative impacts of changes beyond their control on the relationships they foster with the young people.

It is partially because of happenings like this that ACER takes a long-term view of change. The focus is on the impact that the project is having on the young people as opposed to the number of projects created and delivered. To help with this objective, it is measuring the subjective well-being of young people before the workshops and at the end of one year using indicators of competency, autonomy and relatedness to others, as well as personal resources, including self-esteem, resilience and optimism. They are storing the data on a custom-made database. The next step will be to carry out a full analysis.

Summarizing Key Learning Points

The experiences of the ACER Teen Project seem to support the idea that there are important psychological and social foundations of active participation, as well as effects. Working to bolster these may be particularly important for initiatives seeking to work with those subgroups of a local population who are typically given little opportunity to volunteer or lead community projects.

The project found that young people need to *feel* that they are doing well and *experience* positive relationships. Interestingly, improvements in trust and confidence took place before the young people arrived at a stage where they could conceive of translating their ideas into action. Furthermore, the opportunity to get involved in making change happen at the community level seems to be an important precursor for them to feel able to make a change in their own lives. Both these observations lend support for the existence of a dynamic relationship between forms of active participation in community life and subjective well-being.

The project also points to the intensive and long-term nature of initiatives that are truly committed to supporting those that are most marginalized to actively participate. Working with young people whose self-confidence and credibility in wider social networks are low, ACER has intentionally aimed to create the space in their project design to build relationships and provide ongoing coaching support. These project features seem to be important enablers of improved trust and confidence.

The review could have been strengthened by seeking the perspectives of young people themselves. The project has begun collecting self-report measures on well-being, to identify whether aspects of functioning and feelings change for people. Results could form the basis of a group reflection session on the feedbacks which seemed most critical to supporting personal and community development outcomes.

The project staff are finding that the realization of their objectives for more youth participation and engagement does not only depend on improving young people's perceptions about their own capacities and capabilities but also improving the perceptions of adults with whom they need to interact in order to realize their project ideas. This observation is characteristic of a systemic rather than person-centered view of change. In practice, it has involved a shift in project activities towards navigating inequalities of power, resources and dependence by identifying positive ways to engage that will shift local assumptions and social norms about the role and contribution of young people over time.

Conclusion

In seeking to explore the instrumental value of volunteer opportunities for achieving specific socio-economic objectives, this study explores two mediating factors not often emphasized in research exploring the relationship between volunteering and well-being: the dynamic nature and inequality of subjective well-being.

The action research project described in this article took place in the outskirts of Sao Paulo, Brazil in a metropolitan area characterized by high levels of social exclusion, poor performance on child development indicators and the highest crime rates in the country. Its program of group activities aiming to enhance participation among marginalized young people extended beyond consideration of livelihoods. It incorporated a broader economic framework that included reflection sessions on psychological and social well-being, and capabilities to make changes that make a difference. Key principles and learning from the project's iterative design are discussed in relation to developments in well-being research.

The sequence of changes that enabled young people to develop and implement their community projects supports a conceptualization of well-being as a complex, adaptive system where subjective well-being – the experience that one is feeling good and doing well – is both an outcome *and* a resource. Where people are starting from a low base in terms of their levels of self-confidence, interpersonal trust and credibility in social

networks, the learning from this project suggests ways to create spaces for a different pattern of experiences and quality of feedbacks in the well-being system. This is intensive work, which requires flexibility in the approach of staff to respond to individual journeys of change alongside wider systemic issues (e.g., changes in law, local assumptions), which affect the likelihood that the project's program of activities will have a positive and sustained impact. These insights can inform debates about how volunteering opportunities can be used as a tool for social change, particularly where the aim is to create citizens who are active in their own development.

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