Volunteering and Prosocial Behaviour

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Abstract: *The study wants to put in relation prosocial behaviour with well-being. The study's participants were selected from various volunteering groups, involved in student organisations in Romania and outside of it. The data regarding one's own perception of prosocial behaviour and well-being was gathered during the pandemic's first week and after 8 weeks, but the volunteers' activity was tracked in the months that followed. This led to acknowledging that their activities diversified in this field and the participants' number in their groups grew bigger. Finding a meaning based on our prosocial behaviours brings benefits in the social dynamic, diminishes the feeling of loneliness, and leads to optimising our well-being.*

Keywords: *Prosocial behaviour, pandemic, volunteering, quality of life.*

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1. Introduction

When talking about prosocial behaviour, we talk about that type of behaviour focused on keeping, conserving, and promoting social values, without expecting external gratification. In order to talk about this type of behaviour, two conditions need to be achieved: the intention to help people and the possibility of choosing this on your own. Prosocial behaviour is taught, so being exposed to it early on and keeping a conduit in the family, oriented towards it, will stimulate the child to embrace such behaviour. These types of behaviours are encouraged by the society because they bring benefits in social relationships. In these behaviours, two norms are involved – reciprocity (we help the ones that help us) and social reciprocity (we are helping the people without thinking that we will meet them or not, the example being related to supporting those less fortunate) (Boncu et al., 2006).

Building back better (BBB) is a concept introduced to enhance countries' resilience when faced with disasters and to re-build themselves starting from the community. This is based on the community's possibility to find resources and offer support in reconstruction. Starting from these ideas, some students, which volunteered in student organisations, wanted to offer support to all the student categories, as well as reaching out to those in need during the pandemic. Thus, they initiated plans to manage the situations that intervened during the lockdown and pandemic. Although the activity plans in which they volunteered have been done from the beginning of the academic year, when the emergency state has intervened, these have been reconsidered and adapted for the new situation. These plans were oriented towards increasing well-being, reconstructing the lost equilibrium, increase the participants' resilience, identifying those categories that are more vulnerable and offering proper support for their problematic, creating a reference framework to re-establish personal equilibrium throughout the pandemic and afterwards. Some guidelines utilised from documents referring to BBB are: promoting resilience, finding resources in the business space that could aid the supporting and developing projects, promoting people, materials, technologies that could bring change in the given situation, identifying the financial mechanisms that could make all of these possible (donating to other organisations that give support, creating communities, etc.), constructing bridges over cultural or spatial differences (wherever you would find yourself, you could receive support), identifying and including as many affected categories as possible (Clinton, 2006). Of important lessons regarding this type of reconstruction is that students, being involved in

learning activities, represent, or could represent learning hubs for the whole community. Both their teachers and them are interested in their own development, more than any other category, so they can easily represent initiators of development in various activity domains. Starting from some ideas, the volunteering groups immediately got involved in offering support during the pandemic. Their example can lead to prosocial behaviours that can be manifested not only within their volunteering group, but also outside of it (Boncu, 2002). In the meeting space between two people there is an exchange of meanings, social and interpersonal contexts are explored and through this, the two given each other access to the other's world (Duck, 2000). This is mediated by empathy. Meeting the other person was even more necessary during the pandemic, because a lot of people ended up spending some time alone in their house and thus the social contacts were suddenly minimised and moved to the online medium. When you are alone, you feel every issue that may intervene, more acutely, and well-being is deteriorating faster than in other conditions. Above all these, fear related to the new Coronavirus, uneasiness related to the dear ones that are far away maybe, the changes that intervened each day, uncertainty regarding supplies, personal losses – related to equilibrium, definitions or even worse, people, were superposed during the pandemic. To give a new meaning to what is happening to us, it is necessary to understand our present, so we can build the future (Mecu, 2016). We all had fluctuant affects, reaching all the affect's range from the positive to the negative throughout the emergency state. This was doubled by feelings of loss for things' sense – what is the point in doing things for myself only, what is the point of wearing something else rather than the clothes that I am wearing at home, what is the point of caring for myself if I am at home, what is the point of opening the camera if I can leave it off during this online talk, etc. All of these led to believing that all that we do, think of feel is pointless, especially for the people who were living on their own (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2011). Our feelings are constantly changing due to the shifts that intervene in our relationship with the environment, thus our meanings related to what happens to us ought to be constantly evaluated and understood. Our adaptation refers to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural efforts, related to coping with the situation, to managing everything in relation to our own resources (Lazarus, 2011). Throughout the pandemic, but especially during lockdown, we encountered many varied emotions, a lot of them belonging to the negative spectrum. This influenced our well-being throughout the whole period. Well-being is a subjective evaluation of ourselves and it represents the way in which we understand our happiness, and because of it well-being can also be named as

confessed happiness. This state constitutes a synthesis of some recurrent emotional states and it is linked to everyday experiences, lived by each of us (Lazarus, 2011). Favourable attitude and positive norms are constituted by premises in choosing behaviours focused on offering support and empathy. Throughout the pandemic and not only, our attitude towards our behaviour also gives us the impression of a perceived behavioural control. Between the two there is a positive relationship (La Barbera, 2018). During the pandemic, the difficulty came by losing, in some degree, our control over behaviour, doubled by a lot of uncertainty related to what is happening. Moreover, the volunteers' activity offered support in creating premises for re-establishing a daily meaning, for a better emotional management, for concrete actions which were happening rhythmically, and which gave a rational and actional configuration for every participant. Managing one's own emotions represent an important part of understanding how happy we are (Clark, 2011).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Objective and Hypothesis

The main objective of this study was showcasing the volunteers' relationship between being involved in a prosocial activity and optimising well-being throughout the pandemic.

Objective 1. Highlighting the starting parameters regarding well-being values.

Objective 2. Showcasing the prosocial behaviour's role in volunteering group activities and the subjective perception's influence about success in doing this role.

The study focuses on showcasing the prosocial behaviour's role in volunteering groups from student organizations and its influence on the participants' well-being throughout the pandemic.

Hypothesis 1. Focusing on prosocial behaviours leads to being involved in social activities offering support during the pandemic.

Hypothesis 2. Being attentive to prosocial behavior during the first weeks of pandemic constitutes a good predictor for optimizing well-being.

2.2. Participants and instruments

For this study, 35 people participated, being involved in various student organisations across Romania and outside of it, aged 19-26 years old. In order to collect the data describing the participants (age, profession, the

number of organisations they are involved in, their functions within those organisations) a first questionnaire is used. The people that participated in the study are students across different educational paths – bachelors or masters. The second questionnaire is applied to identify the starting values related to their subjective perception of their own prosocial behaviour and well-being. The answers regarding the second questionnaire were marked on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest level and 5 the highest. Also, the participants were told that the term prosocial behaviour is related to the following areas: altruism, self-help, interpersonal attraction, mutual respect, and the one related to well-being targets overall well-being (across all the areas related to their life).

3. Results and discussion

First Hypothesis The participants are people involved in volunteering student organisations. The answers targeting prosocial behaviour and self-evaluation of their own prosocial behaviour brings the following data – all the participants view themselves as focused on prosocial behaviours and the values they give to it are as follows - 17% medium level, 37% high level, and 46% very-high level. These results led to the second hypothesis – as a follow-up for what this study focused on, which is to follow the way in which students are involved in giving support during the pandemic. Regarding well-being, the respondents attributed values below the medium level during the first week of the pandemic (55% medium level, 39% low level, and 6% very-low level). All 35 people were involved in volunteering activities since the beginning of the academic year.

Second Hypothesis The participants' prosocial behaviour made it possible that just after the pandemic's first week; they were mostly focusing on offering support for those who lived alone. The organisations in which the participants volunteered were already involved in creating or optimising well-being, but in that moment, their focus was on actions related to the new situation i.e., the emergency state. Through social involvement, the mood changes (from negative to positive, or from positive to even more positive) and thus well-being is enhanced. Living empathically leads to opportunities for social involvement and prosocial behaviour, which can be constituted as an important predictor for developing socio-emotional health (Van de Groep et al., 2020). To empathically resonate is a way to experiment to what someone other expresses, to understand on a significance level what the other is trying to express.   The quality of a process of empathic understanding is determined by the measure in which the person that shows

empathy is in contact with his or her own emotions and also by his or her way of expressing these as authentically as possible. This creates a bridge of empathic communication between the two people and thus produces a significance felt by both parties. At the end of the day, empathic resonance is a process of knowing oneself and each other, in a different way i.e. the type that targets the other person's inner world (Vanaerschot, 2011). Healthy mental functioning assumes that the experience is taken further. As in the process of personal expression, what the person has lived and experimented in a certain situation to find a constructive sense in the life of the person. To remain in the explicit does not necessarily mean going further. Living the implicit, this means adding a personal significance means being able to traverse the experience so that the person can come out of it enriched and with the ability to go forward. During lockdown was the moment in which we have each discovered why our home was home, because we were mostly orientated towards our inner selves, rather than towards the exterior (Dumitrache, 2017). This led to discovering how we find ourselves in regard to the social dynamic, with empathy or not, with involvement or not. Our success is not defined by our relationships at school or work, but mostly our adaptive capacity and in the way we managed to support other in this adaptive endeavour.

The actions of volunteering organizations have been orientated in such a way during the pandemic, from day one, so that they can offer support to people that have found themselves on their own, and not only. The situations in which the persons were alone in their homes were the following – they have been left alone in their university accommodation because they missed their last window of opportunity to travel home, they needed to isolate as they were coming from a red zone, needed to quarantine upon entering the country, in an unknown space given by their respective home state/country, have made it home, but the rest of their family couldn't isolate with them, got sick and were taken to the hospital, etc. The actions unfolded by certain volunteering organizations have been as follow:

- Daily posts, each on different themes – motivational, quotes, work tasks, something for your well-being, tips & tricks to get through it all better,
- A weekly list with 3 books to read and each of their recommendations, three films to see, three songs to listen to, which all contributed to living in harmony with yourself and your free time (Petre, 2014). If the films were for example recommended or seen by multiple volunteers, then, in their weekly meetings they could discuss

them, and add another activity that personally enriched the members who are part of the organization,

- Twice a week the volunteers could be called by those who were alone for various reasons to have someone to chat to, or to ask for support in case they needed it,
- Yoga or sports activities all done online,
- Workshops – where the students could work online with others on the tasks received during the classes at university – these were an opportunity to spend quality time with others, but also to consult themselves with others on their respective work tasks, or to find new solutions in case these were needed.

In addition to that, the volunteers have been involved in writing about their different experiences in certain magazines or on platforms so that each person's experience can offer a way to follow or a possibility to go further in this hardship we all were carrying shoulder to shoulder.

Each of these actions have led to a diminishing of the feeling of loneliness, to finding sustainable behaviours given the situation, to the belief that someone, at the end of a 'line' can listen to you, can offer you psychological comfort, to also finding out that you are not alone and not the only one going through this situation, to finding experiences similar to yours and a place in which to be able to talk about them, to be understood and to receive support in case of need. The number of people registered for the volunteering organisations rose to 20-35%, which was higher than any other increase throughout the years. Finding a way to support others leads to a better personal resilience and an augmentation of kindness to others, but to a better perception regarding personal success. Taking part in prosocial actions one can notice the creation of reciprocity in behaviour, in the volunteer group, which means that it is oriented towards spreading the positive experience, finding new resources to support, finding new participants in the organization's actions and thus making these actions ampler and more prosocially oriented. For those assisted, during the pandemic, the teams have formed certain fixed markers associated with a state of well-being – the small regular posts, the articles that appeared, the music, the activities suggested, the people who could be contacted, the constant support received. The fact that they were connected with other people that went through similar experiences made each participant engage in behaviours that were socially desirable, or even more than that oriented in a prosocial manner. One of the changes that we have all registered during the pandemic was changing one's daily habits – we could not go out as usual,

we couldn't do many of our usual activities, we couldn't see people we were used to seeing, outdoors' activities were diminished or non-existent. All these small habits were suddenly gone, or diminished drastically, and volunteer student organisations tried hard to add something instead of all those activities, substituting these with small activities and things that could happen in the current state, and which, through regularity and positive content offered a direction and path of the day or the week that were easier to do. Throughout the pandemic, due to the many changes and the unusual of the whole situation, it is possible that some of those who were completely alone would have been demotivated, or even bored, but through the volunteers' actions and their dynamics, they were offered a direction, motivation, or even orientation towards changes to increase their state of well-being. The volunteers' activity was oriented towards the following: facilitating social contacts, moral support, source of information, eliminating the feelings of isolation (Badea & Constantin, 2002)

The progress seen for the 35 participants in the study has been tied to their own meaning shared in rapport to giving support, defining personal success, diminishing the negative feelings throughout the pandemic, growing their role in the volunteering groups, forming a support network, the feeling of belonging, developing new friendships, and last but not least, augmenting the feeling of well-being. For all the participants in this study one could see the following changes to the level of perceiving one's well-being state after 8 weeks – 14% on a very high level, 23% on a high level and 63% on an average level.

In addition to this, starting from the experience of offering support throughout this period and in the way it was done, the volunteers have found ways to orient themselves towards other categories that were in difficulty, and have thus initiated projects – some geared towards the homeless, protecting the environment, under-privileged students (support for online classes), fund raising for certain actions oriented towards solutioning the health crisis (donating masks, making the visors, etc), actions to get used to student life for those in their first year, the possibility to befriend those in older years, socializing for those in Year 1 in order to be able to create the feeling of belonging, and a better group dynamic, in the conditions of only having online classes.

4. Conclusion

The pandemic forced all of us to live in an unexpected way and this has not contributed to our general well-being but generated quite the opposite. Our main concern was tied to our health, but on top of that we

can also add the following – caring for loved ones, for those far away, the difficulty of the situations that have arisen, etc. For those 35 participants in this study, the fact that they could be part of volunteering activities, which had a deep prosocial character, lead to defining their roles better, to living the present moment to the fullest, to finding a positive meaning each day, each contributing to making the emergency state easier, to keeping themselves healthy, to optimising their well-being throughout the difficult weeks that have followed. The fact that the organizations which they were part of accepted new members throughout the pandemic, and the fact that they were not in small numbers, proved, once more that a prosocial behaviour leads through reciprocity to other similar. Continuing these projects and taking part in new ones brought new meanings of development of student organisations and these finding new resources to continue.

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