

Weekly Report

Voluntary activities in an ageing society: East and West Germany

SOEP respondents have been asked about their participation in voluntary activities ever since the Survey started in 1984. Here we provide evidence about stability and change in levels of participation over the last twenty years. It is often suggested that an ageing society requires, or would benefit from more voluntary and caring activity. More people are in need of assistance and there may be more people, including the retired and semi-retired, with enough time to provide it. In April 2008 Federal Minister Ursula von der Leyen (Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth) announced a new initiative to foster the voluntary activities of Senior Citizens with a budget of 22 Million Euro.

In the 1970s, in the heyday of alternative society and self-help movements, the concept of voluntary activity was regarded as almost obsolete. Many people appeared to be more self-regarding and less other-regarding. But now the concept of volunteering is bound up with intense interest in social capital and the development of civil society. The Harvard social scientist, Robert D. Putnam, through his research on declining social capital in Southern Italy and the U.S., has perhaps done more than anyone to stimulate interest in the topic (Putnam, 1995). Transitions in Eastern Europe to representative democracy and market economics have also led to a renewed focus on how the institutions of civil society develop and can be promoted (Schelsky, 1965). Obvious signs of the perceived prestige and importance of voluntary activity came when 1996 was declared the Year of Voluntary Work and then 2001 became the Year of Volunteers!

Voluntary activity means different things to different commentators. Core ideas are that the activities must be unpaid and that they take place in the context of institutions and clubs—including churches, welfare organisations and political parties—which people join voluntarily. Some analyses of voluntary activity are at the macro level; they seek to understand the function of voluntary organisations in a modern state and society. From this perspective they can be seen as promoting social solidarity and serving as intermediate links between individuals and the bureaucratised welfare state (Schelsky, 1965; Evers and Olk, 2002).

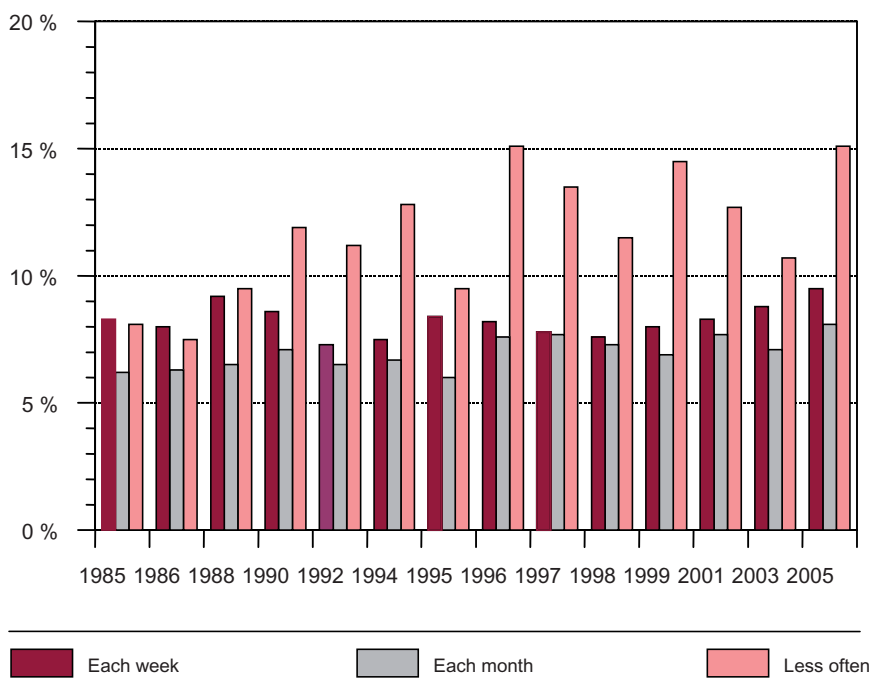
Micro-level analyses, as in this article, are focused on the motives, characteristics and specific activities of volunteers themselves. As far as motives are concerned, there has been a shift away from the traditional assumption that voluntary activity

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Figure 1

Voluntary Activities 1985-2005: West Germany



Source: SOEP 1990-2005.

must be altruistic and towards the view that volunteers participate to help themselves as well as others (Braun et al, 1997). They gain satisfaction from the process of participation, of being involved. They may enjoy a sense of solidarity with fellow participants and may, in some cases, wish to get ahead and take on prestigious leadership roles in voluntary organisations (Klages, 2002).

The organisational and social context of voluntary activity has to some extent changed. Traditional institutions, especially the churches and the major welfare organisations, were quite hierarchical and bureaucratised. It is clear that from the 1970s onwards more informal and flexible groupings and initiatives developed in response to new social movements, including the women’s movement and the environmental movement.

20 years of SOEP evidence on the prevalence of voluntary activity in East and West Germany

A question now put to SOEP respondents every two years requires showing a list of activities and then, for each activity, asking respondents whether they participate ‘every week’, ‘every month’, ‘seldom’ or ‘never’.¹ The item about voluntary activities comes

after questions about sport and church-going (in order to minimise overlap) and refers specifically to ‘voluntary activities in clubs, associations or social services’.

Figure 1 gives results for West Germany from 1985-2005 and Figure 2 reports for East Germany from 1990-2005.

In West Germany levels of participation have changed little in 20 years. About 7-9% participate weekly and another 6-8% monthly. There may have been a slight increase in recent years,² but the trend is not consistent, even though 2005 appears to be the year with the highest recorded level of voluntary activity. (Preliminary results for 2007 indicate that high levels of activity appear to have been maintained).

In East Germany there clearly has been a change. Participation was at about the same levels as the Western states when the question was first asked in 1990; that is, before reunification. However, after reunification voluntary activity plainly declined, falling below Western levels, before picking up again from 1999 onwards. By 2005 participation was not quite back to where it had been in 1990, and was still somewhat lower than in the Western states. One somewhat speculative interpretation is that personal anxieties generated by transition problems may have

¹ The question was asked annually until 1999, since when it has been biannual.

² However, much of this increase is just among those who report ‘seldom’ participating, rather than ‘never’.

Figure 2

Voluntary Activities 1990-2005: East Germany

Source: SOEP 1990-2005.

made East Germans temporarily more preoccupied with their personal affairs, and less willing to find time for others.

What are the characteristics of people who are more rather than less willing to be engaged in voluntary activities? Is it the case that older people, who may have fewer work and direct family responsibilities, are more likely than others to participate? Table 1 provides some answers. The evidence is just for 2005 (given that the characteristics of participants scarcely changed over the years) and includes a comparison between East and West Germans. Technically, Table I reports logistic regression results in which the outcome being explained is whether or not survey respondents participated in voluntary activities at least once a month. The statistics in the table are odds ratios, and their interpretation is straightforward. For example, the first odds ratio of 0.67 applies to East Germany and means that the odds of an East German participating monthly in voluntary activity were about two-thirds those of a West German.

Perhaps the most interesting result, in the context of Germany's ageing society, is that it transpires that middle aged and older people, from 50 right up to 79 years old, are more likely to volunteer than younger people. Also, those who are marginally employed ('geringfuegig erwerbstaetig') are more

Table 1

Participates in voluntary activities at least monthly 2005: logistic regressions

	2005
East Germany (ref: West Germany)	.67 **
Women (ref: men)	.71 **
Nationality (ref: German)	.42 **
Age group (ref: 35-49)	
16-34	.75 **
50-64	1.30 **
65-79	1.28 **
over 79	.47 **
Education: (ref: less than Realschule)	
Realschule or Fachhochschulreife	1.32 **
Abitur	1.55 **
Employment status (ref: not employed)	
employed	1.07
marginally employed	1.82 **
unemployed	.64 **
Health disability (ref: none)	.66 **
Constant	-.65
Pseudo R ²	.05
N	21.105

Source: SOEP 2005 (* p<.05; **p<.001).

likely to engage in voluntary activity than more fully employed individuals. But people who are unemployed and searching for work volunteer less. Better educated people, as is well known, volunteer in greater numbers than those with less formal education, probably because they have greater skills and confidence to engage in most forms of social activity.

The evidence in Table 1 indicates that men engage in more voluntary activity than women, but this needs to be understood in context. Surveys of carers make it clear that many more women engage in direct caring activities than men (Schupp and Kuenemund, 2004). Men, however, are more involved in clubs and in voluntary activities like sports coaching.

Discussion

Various attempts have been made to put a monetary value on voluntary activities, as if they could be treated as an alternative to the welfare state, and hence as saving money from the public purse. However, their value cannot really be quantified, especially in so far as they promote social solidarity and are of psychological and emotional benefit to the givers as well as the receivers. There is also some danger of exaggeration when commentators heap praise on the amount of voluntary activity which occurs. In reality, the available evidence, including the evidence in SOEP, is too general for researchers to be able to estimate the range of benefits which may accrue. We need detailed time budget studies which enable us to document precisely who helps whom, and with what beneficial (and other) effects. Initially, these studies should include open-ended questions, so that givers and receivers can describe in their own words what they are doing and why.

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ISSN 1860-3343
Price: Euro 10.–
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