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Social Responsibility Projects and Sensitivity of College Students

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Abstract:

This paper aims to understand college students' sensitivity towards social responsibility projects through qualitative research. In June 2014, in-depth interviews were conducted with students who had taken part in social responsibility projects, in İstanbul. Most students who are sensitive towards such projects are females, students in the Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department. They participate in more than one project at a time and/or they have handicapped family members. The female embracement of charity work shows the patriarchalism of the Turkish society. Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department students are more sensitive than others, because they are prospective Care professionals. Presence in a project or one-to-one contact with a disabled family member encourages students to get involved in more projects and be socially responsible. To attract more people and especially men into such projects, the society should break patriarchalism, both campuses and mass media should work on raising awareness for social responsibility projects.

Key words: social responsibility, social sensitivity, social awareness, disability

Introduction

Social responsibility whose roots stem from charity (Toker & Tat, 2013: 37) is defined as volunteer ethical and humanitarian activities without any expectation of benefit in return. In this context, there are two relevant types of people in the society: Those who would be happy because of others' happiness and those who would be unhappy because of others' unhappiness. These two types are "good people" who are socially sensitive and "selfish homoeconomicus",

representative of the materialist flow (Ören, Eser, Akman, 2012, 5). Social responsibility covers a large spectrum of rights, from human rights, to women's and minorities' rights; even environmental worries fall under the umbrella of social responsibility in a larger social framework (Jones, 2002). In the context of the Turkish society, the charity and solidarity concept that comes from the seljukian and ottoman *waqf* (foundation) tradition, that produced works such as mosques, shelters and libraries, are examples of the implementation of social responsibility (Elma et al, 2010: 236; Ören, Eser, Akman, 2012: 5).

The existence of service-learning classes earned a legal framework in the United States in 1990, and this approach spread first amongst American universities. Afterwards, it also jumped over to countries such as Canada, Mexico, South Korea and Australia (Elma et al., 2010: 234). In the case of Turkey, in the academic year 2006-2007, the teacher formation programs of education faculties comprised the course entitled "community service-learning". This program was put into practice in the academic year 2008-2009. In this course, students have access to both theory and practice. They determine social problems, produce solutions to those problems and take actively part in the related projects. Similar classes had been offered in some universities' academic programs even before that date. In fact as of the 2000s, both state and private universities have this class in their programs and social responsibility implementation and research centers that produce different projects (Saran et al., 2011).

In an atmosphere where people give increasing importance to social responsibility, this article intends to understand college students' approach towards social responsibility projects and review the motivations of volunteer students through a qualitative research.

Information on the research

The research sample consists of seven students who have taken part in on-campus social responsibility projects and agreed to give in-depth interviews in a foundation university in İstanbul. Throughout the academic year 2013-2014, those students donated blood to the Turkish Red Crescent, cooked food and/or sold it on campus for the benefit of the needy, attended social awareness raising seminars etc. They also volunteered for the particular *Sesli Kitap Project* (literally the "Loud Book Project") that involves reading for the blind in a soundproof office and producing audio books for them, a project that started on campus in the academic year 2013-2014. In the *Sesli Kitap Project*, the academicians who took the lead contacted *Türkiye Beyazay Derneği* (Turkish White Moon Association) and encouraged students to read in particular the books requested by the blind. *Türkiye Beyazay Derneği* is a non-governmental organization that was legalized in 1992. It works for disabled people, tries to raise social awareness about them, provides support services for them and collaborates with similar institutions internationally (*Türkiye Beyazay Derneği*, <http://www.beyazay.org.tr/>).

Chart 1: Information on the interviewed students

Departments	Female	Male	Total
Political Science and International Relations	2	0	2
Nursing	2	0	2
Psychological Counseling and Guidance	1	1	2
Business Administration	1	0	1
Architecture	1	0	1
Total	7	1	8

The qualitative research was conducted with the intention of working on a representative sample of students who take part in social responsibility projects, based on their department and their gender. There was a random student selection among the members of the Social Responsibility Club and the volunteers from the *Sesli Kitap Project*. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded in June 2014 in the researcher's office. In this process, ethical standards were met. The university's upper management provided the researcher with the appropriate approval for conducting this research, and the researcher informed the interviewees about the research's aim properly. The researcher transcribed recorded interviews, analyzed the results and identified common points amongst them using excel charts. She also used pseudonyms in the context of this article to protect the students' privacy.

Social responsibility in the literature

A literature review on "social responsibility" shows that both the Turkish and the foreign articles focus largely on the particular subject of "corporate social responsibility" (Argüden, 2002; Yamak, 2007; Top, 2012; Luetkenhorst, 2004; Silberhorn & Warren, 2007; Menz, 2010). Some other academic work focuses mainly on service-learning classes in colleges and their impact on students (Cornelius, Wallace & Tassabehji, 2007; Atakan & Eker, 2007; Toker & Tat, 2013; Küçükoğlu & Ozan, Mayıs 2014). Studies on "disability awareness" involve the report prepared by the Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Administration for Disabled People on "the social perception of disability" (Başbakanlık Özürlüler İdaresi Başkanlığı, 2009) and the "World Disability Report" prepared by the World Health Organization. There are also articles on the college students' attitudes toward disabled people (Sarı, Bektaş, Altıparmak, 2010; Gürsul & Tüzün, 2008) and "social perception of disabled people and their social exclusion" (Aslan & Şeker, 2011; Seçer, Sarı, Çetin, 2010).

The research that has been conducted to date is rather on corporate social responsibility, service-learning classes in colleges and their impact on students, perception of the disabled, problems the disabled are confronted with and potential solution proposals. However, this study is rather on the sensitivity of college students towards social responsibility projects. The interviewed students had not been exposed to any service-learning classes beforehand.

Social Responsibility Projects of the University and the Volunteering Students

In the foundation university where this research was conducted, in the academic year 2013- 2014 there are 12 departments. In those departments, there are 754 female (71%) and 307 (29%) male students, totaling 1061 students (Interview conducted with the head of the Registrar Office, June 6, 2014). It is rather the Health, Culture and Sports Office of the university that usually organizes charity works under the umbrella of various clubs. However, there is also a particular club named “Social Responsibility Club” in the university. 11 male and 10 female students founded this club in the academic year 2012-2013, and there seems to be a balance of gender among the founding members. The club members mentioned though, that -once the club was founded- it was the female students who became active from the start. As of June 2014, the Facebook group of the club has 141 members, and only 44 of them (31 percent) are male students. Female students seem to embrace social responsibility and charity more than male students.

In the academic year 2013-2014, under the umbrella of the Health, Culture and Sports Office, 14 charity events have been organized (Interview with the head of the Health, Culture and Sports Office, June 6, 2014). Half of the events are *yemek kermesi* (food bazaar). These bazaars involve cooking tea-time food at home and bringing it to campus for sale in exchange for a little money. This type of charity was organized to help homeless children in Turkey, an orphanage under construction in Uganda, Syrian refugees, victims of war in Syria and victims of the Soma accident. On May 13, 2014, the Soma mining disaster took the lives of 301 and deeply grieved the entire country (Milliyet, May 17, 2014). There were also projects of collecting books and clothing for prison inmates. Two seminars were organized in order to raise awareness about “sign language”. Also, students watched the documentary called “The Outcry” describing the suffering of 10 women who had escaped the war in Syria. Students also paid a visit to Down Café in Mecidiyeköy, in the week of World Down Syndrome Day (March 21). Down Café is a place where youngsters with an education on tourism and hotel management, however suffer from Down Syndrome, work and earn their living. It is an initiative to integrate those youngsters into society (Posta, April 28, 2012). The university students went to Down Café to show their solidarity.

The charitable activities organized on campus are rather food bazaars and awareness-raising movie displays and seminar organizations. In fact, the main idea about these events seems to be awareness raising on social responsibility rather than fund raising.

Chart 2: Charity activities of the university in the academic year 2013-2014

Area of activity	Times	%
Food bazaar	7	54
Donation of book/clothing	2	15
Donation of blood	1	8
Awareness raising movies/seminars	3	23
Total	13	100

In the academic year 2013-2014, one of the most comprehensive charity organizations was the *Sesli Kitap Project*. This project was announced to the students through the on-campus posters and university's official webpage as well as through social media networks. 27 students declared themselves as volunteers. 92.5 percent of the volunteers turned out to be female students.

Chart 3: Information of the students sensitive toward the *Sesli Kitap Project*

Departments	Female	Male	Total
Psychological Counseling and Guidance	10	1	11
Nursing	5	0	5
Political Science and International Relations	4	0	4
Business Administration	3	1	4
English Teacher Education Program	1	0	1
Food Engineering	1	0	1
Architecture	1	0	1
Total	25	2	27

When reading the above-mentioned chart, one needs to keep in mind the fact that academicians who initiated and promoted amongst the student body this particular social responsibility activity were from the following two departments: Political Science and International Relations (the author of this article), as well as Nursing (Candan Öztürk). Therefore, it could be possible that the students from those two departments felt more attracted to the project, since it involved their own departments. Besides, the above-mentioned chart shows that students from the Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department are the ones who are most sensitive to the project. No students from the other departments (Turkish Teacher Education Program, Preschool Teacher Education Program, Psychology, Computer Engineering and Islamic Sciences) volunteered in the project.

Key Findings

One of the clearest findings of this research is that female students are more sensitive than male students towards projects on social responsibility. According to the interviewees: "With this kind of stuff [related to social solidarity and charity], generally speaking, it is women who are concerned with", "On such issues, men stay rather in the background. This is how it is molded in our heads ever since our childhood", "Women are nurturing, they embrace such subjects". In fact, these explanations are not very surprising. On the one hand, according to the World Values Survey, the membership rates in charity organizations, help foundations and humanitarian organizations are very low in Turkey, and men seem to be more numerous than women (Membership rates are 1.4 percent for men and 0.7 percent for women; World Values Survey 2010-2014, WV6_Results_Turkey_2011_v_2014_04_28.pdf). This phenomenon could be explained by the fact that such membership requires money, and that women, both in Turkey and

all around the world, have relatively less access to money and assets. On the other hand, in Turkey, women traditionally constitute the group that takes “care of children, elderly, sick and the disabled” (Koray, 2005: 336). Female students act according to the traditional gender roles and volunteer for both on-campus and off-campus social solidarity works (Acar, Ayata and Varoğlu, 1999). Furthermore, research conducted both in Turkey (Alver, 2005; Karataş, 2012) and abroad (Turnage et al., 2012) argued that female students score higher than male students on empathic skills evaluation. In this research also, the interviewed students explained that “Society encourages men not to be emotional, and this is why men do not stand close to such subjects”, and that “Women are always in the front lines when it comes to charity work”.

The second main finding of this research is that there is a positive connection between the social responsibility awareness of students and their prospective profession. Although there is need to support this finding through a quantitative work, according to this research, most of the students who take part in social responsibility projects are from the Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department. In fact, previous research had also argued that students of the Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department have shown higher empathetic tendencies and fewer psychiatric symptoms than, for instance, students of engineering departments (Yavuz & Gazioğlu, 2008).

A third finding is that students who are sensitive towards social responsibility projects have some particular characteristics that would be considered different from those of the majority. Those students are part of more than one social responsibility project or charity work project both on-campus and off-campus. Also, they have disabled family members. In other words, students who are sensitive towards social responsibility projects are the ones who have already thought about difficulties the needy and the disabled would confront in their daily lives. According to the literature on this matter, Horner-Johnson and colleagues argued that Japanese students, who had disabled family members or friends, approached the rights of intellectually disabled people more suitably than others (Horner-Johnson et al, 2002). Hatice Yıldırım Sarı and colleagues, who worked in Turkey and on nursing students, argued that students who had disabled family members and friends did not have a significantly different approach than the others towards the disabled (Sarı, Bektaş, Altıparmak, 2010). In this framework, the findings of this paper seem to be close to the findings of Horner-Johnson and their colleagues.

One of the best examples showing the sensitivity of students towards social responsibility projects and disability is Ümit. Ümit is a student of the Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department and the vice-president of the Counseling Club. Her involvement with social responsibility works is not limited to the on-campus charity. For instance, she experienced *Dialogue in The Dark*. This is an exhibition and workshop that “has been presented in more than 30 countries and 130 cities throughout the world since its opening in 1988” (Dialogue in the Dark, <http://www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com/>). In this exhibition, blind guides lead people “through specially constructed dark rooms in which scent, sound, wind, temperature and texture convey the characteristics of daily environments - for example a park, a city, a boat cruise or a bar”. In İstanbul, this exhibition is in the Gayrettepe subway. Ümit saw the exhibition

announcement in a subway and heard from Psychology Department friends that “One should certainly go there”. The Counseling Club meant to make a visit to the exhibition, but because of the Soma Mining Disaster, the plan was cancelled. When the mining disaster took place, the student clubs considered arranging buses and going to Soma in order to help miners and their families. However, as a second thought, they figured their presence in that area would only bring more chaos to the atmosphere, and they turned their sensitivity into financial support. The government declared three days of national mourning, and the student clubs did not get involved with any other activities during those days. When the plan about visiting *Dialogue in the Dark* under the umbrella of Counseling Club was officially cancelled, some members decided to take the initiative and went to the exhibition on their own.

It was such a special experience. I would say that this was the highest level of *empathy*. I sometimes try to walk on the yellow lines [particularly made for the blind to follow], to make *empathy*. But I used to open up my eyes at times. There [in the exhibition] one finds herself uneasy. The person who is there, the one who helped us was visually handicapped. However, she was so relaxed. I would recommend everyone to go there in order to make the experience on their own (Ümit, Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department, Sophomore, June 2, 2014).

Ümit emphasizes the importance of *empathy*. Whenever the interviewees were asked about “what would ‘help’ mean to them”, they often mentioned the concept of *empathy*. Empathy is “understanding correctly another person’s feelings and thoughts by putting one’s self in the other person’s shoes” (Dökmen, 1995). Empathy is one of the main motivations of the socially responsible students. In the example mentioned above, Ümit experienced *Dialogue in the Dark* in order to empathize with the blind. However, this is not the only indicator of Ümit’s sensibility towards social responsibility. She also has been involved in some charity activities through *İnsani Yardım Vakfı* (İHH, Humanitarian Relief Foundation) and pays visits to *Sevgi Evleri* (literally “Love Houses”) in her hometown Konya. İHH is a Turkish NGO, “a bridge of charity” that was institutionalized in 1995 and that has since helped people from all around the world. İHH helps those who suffer from some sort of inconvenience, no matter what their region, religion, race and confession. İHH works so that people’s basic rights and liberties are not violated (İHH, <http://www.ihh.org.tr/tr/main/pages/hakkimizda/114>). This NGO has benefited from broader awareness for having organized Gaza Freedom Flotilla in May 2010. With the Israelite soldiers’ capturing the Turkish ship Mavi Marmara, there were deaths and injuries, and İHH caught the attention of both the Turkish and the international public. *Sevgi Evleri* refer to the houses “recently” organized under the umbrella of Children’s and Youth’s Services Department. Those special houses take care of ten to twelve needy children and raise them in family-like setups (Sosyal Güvenlik Kurumu, <http://www.hitapsgk.com/node/2602>).

[On campus], we had other charity projects and food bazaars, too. (...) We had a project for orphans, for instance (...) We cover the monthly financial needs of an orphan (...) This is both a club and an İHH activity. We, with my friends, as part of a group of seven volunteer friends, we cover the monthly expenses of an orphan. Furthermore, I went to *Sevgi Evleri*. My mother is a

vaiz (preacher) at *Sevgi Evleri*. This is why she goes there once a week. When the school is over, I am in Konya. I go to those houses there. I talk with children there. I behave like an older sister to them (...) Here I cannot take such responsibility [in *Sevgi Evleri* in İstanbul], because there should be ideally a kind of continuity (Ümit, Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department, Sophomore, June 2, 2014).

In her involvement with social responsibility works, Ümit was influenced by her mother who works at *Sevgi Evleri*. Also, one should talk about the connection between religious beliefs and the sense of social aid mission they prescribe for the believers. Ümit goes to *Sevgi Evleri* in her home town in Konya. She cannot get involved with similar charity activities in İstanbul, since she does not live in this city permanently and since in İstanbul, the rules about continuity seem to be stricter.

A freshman in the Nursing Department, Oya, is also someone who gets involved with not only on-campus but also off-campus social responsibility activities. On campus, she joined food bazaars and particularly emphasized her role in the Soma Mining Disaster charity activity. Oya, rather than talking about her individual social awareness, underlined the mobilization of the entire Nursing Department students. In fact, there seems to be a connection in between the social responsibility awareness of students and the prospective area of work. Nursing students are amongst the prospective care givers of the society.

We brought some things from home [to the charity event organized on campus]. We also tried to buy things as a Department. We joined some food bazaars such as the one organized for the orphans. Indeed, we did as much as we could, within the boundaries of our budget. For instance, I wanted to donate books, but all of my books are in Konya (*laughter*). But there also, I do things. For instance, I bring toys to children's houses, go to senior centers. Particularly on my father's death anniversaries, I donate toys for charity purposes. I mean, chocolate bars, balloons, books, toys and such things (...) A children's house is a building that the state shelters one until the age of 18. I also try to pay attention to the elderly, and this makes them so happy (...) I believe we should embrace [the elderly]. I mean, I do not know, but I feel so sad for them, for their situation. Most of them feel abandoned. We should not let them feel this way (Oya, Nursing Department, Freshman, June 2, 2014).

Oya underlined the fact that the Nursing Department students get involved with the on-campus charity events as a group. She shows sensitivity not only towards children but also towards the elderly. She has created a particular charity work in commemoration of her father's death anniversary. Oya is not the only person who visits the elderly. A freshman from the Political Science and International Relations Department, Semra, has also sensitivity towards the elderly. At the university, I became involved with blood donation. I also took part in the food bazaar, for the one organized for the Soma disaster for instance. I also have an off-campus activity. I go to the Bakırköy Seniors Center. I go there to have a heart-to-heart talk, to be friends with people there. I mentioned it before, it is about *empathy*. We are getting old. No one knows what will happen tomorrow. We may be in the same situation one day. I go there to have a small talk. Maybe they have problems, maybe they would want to share those. If they do not want to share,

maybe we could just chat for a bit, and they would at least pass a good time. This is why I go there whenever I have time (Semra, Political Science and International Relations Department, Freshman, June 3, 2014).

In the above-mentioned paragraph, besides the emphasis put on the notion of *empathy*, there is also the worry about “what tomorrow will bring”. In fact, everyone could become needy suddenly. If one is in a difficult position, he or she would expect others to provide help. This is one of the motivations behind the students’ participation in social responsibility projects. It is not only Semra but many others also underlined this point of view throughout the interviews.

Another common characteristic among the students who take part in social responsibility projects is that they have disabled family members. Since this research project is a qualitative one, it does not provide statistically significant data. In this qualitative research, three out of the seven interviewees (43 percent) have disabled family members. A sophomore from the Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department Berkan, who had donated blood on campus, would be an example of this group. Berkan has mentally handicapped cousins. Therefore “he knows what kind of a feeling it is to be around with them and this is why he wants to help out”. Ümit, a sophomore from the Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department who visited *Dialogue in the Dark* has a grand-father who has “an extreme seeing disability” and wanders with a focusing glass all the time. The grandfather has a particularly hard life especially when he is outside his home. However, according to Ümit, “If people were more conscious and helped eliminating those people’s obstacles, the grandfather would go out and live more easily”. Aysel, a sophomore in the Business Administration Department, one of the founders of the Social Responsibility Club and an active member of the executive committee, got particularly affected by the *Sesli Kitap Project*, because her aunt is blind. She felt interested in this project, because she knew intimately how much need there is in the society due to being familiar with her aunt’s disability.

Empathy and a possible prospective need for similar help are the two main motivators for students to take part in social responsibility projects. The students who have the sensitivity toward social responsibility projects are the ones who put themselves in the shoes of who suffer from inconveniences and take action in this respect. Those students are part of several social responsibility projects rather than one and only project.

Conclusion

According to a research conducted in the academic year 2013-2014 in a foundation university in Turkey, the students who are the most sensitive to social responsibility projects are females and students of the Psychological Counseling and Guidance Department. Those students take part in more than one social responsibility project both on and off campus. They also have physically or mentally disabled family members. Behind these results, there are three main factors: The patriarchal society naturally channels females to social responsibility and charity works. There is a connection between the care-giving prospective profession and the social responsibility awareness of students. Also, the existence of outside stimulus such as having a disabled family

member or a professor who encourages towards such projects has a positive impact on students' sensitivity. Reading these results, one should bear in mind the fact that these results are collected through a qualitative research and should therefore be complemented and detailed through a quantitative research covering several universities.

If societies want not only women but also men to take care of social responsibility issues and engage in charity, societies need to break patriarchalism and work on a radical social change. In this framework, declarations and proposals made by international organizations such as the United Nations, the European Council and the European Union should be taken into account, so that men and women have equal rights and responsibilities. Also, people should be regularly exposed to social awareness through seminars, awareness raising movies and posters during their college education and through mass media throughout their entire life.

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