

How interest develops among youth-association volunteers

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Abstract

The article¹ is based on the empirical analysis of the *Jugendverbandsstudie* “Study of youth associations”. Interviews based on guidelines are conducted for this qualitative survey, which is carried out from the standpoint of the subject. Based on Grotlüschen’s revised theory of interest, the article will look at how work in youth associations helps people develop new interests. The article will also look at the extent to which dyadic relationships encourage or boost the development of new interests in volunteers who are mentored. Finally, the article will consider the impact of this familiarisation with new subject areas and the arousal of new interests on the career and training/education choices of volunteers in youth associations.

1 An analysis of youth associations

The revised theory of interest (Grotlüschen 2010) is based on several analyses carried out in various training formats in courses for students and in academic training (Grotlüschen/Krämer 2009), in skills assessment of immigrants and in advanced training courses for commercial and financial managers (Grotlüschen/Kubsch 2010). In the “Study of youth associations” research project² one of the aspects investigated is youth associations’ roles as places where interests develop.

In contrast to schools, families, the media and peers, youth associations and voluntary work tended to play a subordinate role until now. However, depending on the study concerned, a minimum of 40 per cent and higher of young people in Germany are members of at least one club (see Riekmann 2011, p. 50 et seq.). In contrast to families and formal educational institutions, youth associations play a special role in terms of socialisation because they follow principles of free will, self-organisation and participation (Düx et al. 2008, p. 108 et seq.). Nevertheless, youth associations are helping to perpetuate social inequality. Where certain social backgrounds dominate, the reasons why certain people are excluded lie in the association itself (Kleemann-Göhring/Epstein, forthcoming). Social selectivity manifests also itself because youth associations tend to engage young people whose parents aren’t immigrants (see Munsch 2010).

1 This article is an updated reprint of two articles entitled: “Interessegenese, Weitergabe von Verbandserbe und Förderprozesse in Jugendverbänden als Beiträge zur Übergangsgestaltung” (Epstein, forthcoming) and “Lernort Jugendverband – Einblicke in soziale Praktiken non-formalen und informellen Lernens vor dem Hintergrund milieuspezifischer Verbandskulturen” (Kleemann-Göhring/Epstein, forthcoming).

2 The article is founded on the empirical results of the *Jugendverbandsstudie – Zur kompensatorischen Bedeutung von Jugendverbänden als Bildungsorte* ‘Youth associations study - on the compensatory significance of youth associations as places for education.’ The project is a collaboration between Hamburg University (management and project coordination Anke Grotlüschen) and Duisburg-Essen (management: Helmut Bremer) and is sponsored by BMBF (Federal Ministry of Education and Research), ref. no. 01JC1124. Project term: 1.9.2012 - 31.8.2015.

Based on Dux et al. (2008, p. 28) – voluntary work is considered to be an activity carried out free of charge and relatively regularly in groups or organisations.

2 Issues and hypotheses

The following issues are looked at in the Hamburg sub project of the qualitative research project entitled “Study of youth associations”, sponsored by the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF):

- To what extent do new interests develop when people work in youth associations?
- What role does mentoring play within the association?
- How do volunteers’ educational strategies and career choices change as a result?

When looking at these issues, the following working hypotheses are assumed: youth associations can clearly play a role in developing interests by repeatedly reminding volunteers of particular topics or items of interest which are typical of the association (Grotlüschen/Epstein 2014). The assumption is that dyadic relationships play a key role in these processes.

There are indications that mentoring relationships and the development of interest are closely linked because interest can only be aroused in volunteers if they’re encouraged in the first place. Mentoring can probably lead to even greater contact with areas of interest. These mentoring relationships probably come about because the association needs to find successors to secure its future. These hypotheses and assumptions are drawn mainly from two theories, which will be presented: the revised theory of interest and the findings on mentoring research.

3 Theoretical background

3.1 Theory of interest

The Munich School (overview in Krapp 2004; Krapp 2005) is an important variant of the theory of interest. It focuses on individual levels of interest, how interesting the object is and therefore the existence of interest. How interest in certain issues develops is the subject of the revised theory of interest (Grotlüschen 2010), which concentrates more strongly on how interest is generated. The Munich School and the revised theory of interest assume that there is no such thing as general interest, but that interest is always linked to certain topics. Interests don’t lie dormant in the subjects, but they must have come into contact with a subject (in some cases several times) before interest is aroused. On the pragmatic axis (see the same source p. 188) Grotlüschen’s theory of interest identified three main phases when interest is developed. After the first contact with a subject area come the latency, expansion and competency phases (as well as a process of distancing, if the area of interest has to be given up).

The latency phase depends particularly on a range of different influences from the person’s direct environment. During this phase, interest in the subject can be interrupted. Anything new is fascinating, but there’s still only a loose connection with the subject area. It’s possible that new interest doesn’t develop until contact is repeated several times.

In the expansion phase on the other hand, resources such as time, money and energy are invested in the new area of interest. The development of interest is

primarily attributed to the area itself. Any influence from third parties is quickly forgotten (Grotlüschen/Krämer 2009).³ This phenomenon is familiar in research into training/further education. Friebel et al. call it self-motivated interest development (“Selbst-Festivalisierung”) (2000, p. 325).

The competency phase is characterised by in-depth, detailed knowledge about the subject area. The ability to ask diverse questions that convey enthusiasm and passion is accompanied by the ability to network and a willingness to lobby for the subject area itself, or for social groups representing the subject area.

Social backgrounds mainly govern which people come into contact with areas of interest. Social backgrounds (Bourdieu 1987, p. 277 et seq.) govern certain preferences. In other words, affiliation to a social group affects the likelihood of coming into contact with certain subject areas and perceiving these in a positive or negative light. This forms the habitual axis in Grotlüschen’s model (Grotlüschen 2010, p 216-248). Here influences are looked at which play a role in the areas of interest selected by the subject (see same source pp. 217-230) and the “participation” category is more about “what is selected and for what reasons” (see same source, p. 231).

3.2 Coaching and mentoring theories

Coaching is seen here as process of personal support in dyads (learning partnerships between two people). In this case, experience is more relevant than a person’s actual age, even if the two often correlate. Therefore, in a voluntary setting someone with more experience coaches someone with less experience.

Mentoring relationships aren’t always clear to the people involved (particularly to the mentees). Political scientist El-Mafaalani (2012, p. 53 et seq.; 209) from Münster calls non-family mentors *soziale Paten* ‘social mentors’ and examines their roles in boosting the educational success of children of blue-collar workers. El-Mafaalani borrows the term ‘social mentors’ from Ahlheit and Schömer (2009, S. 420 et seq.), who use it to describe a historically established possibility for social advancement. However, as hardly any more specific studies on mentoring in the volunteering sector exist (or in other words the “Study of youth associations” is entering new territory) the results of international research on mentoring need to be taken into account. However, mentoring and coaching have a more formal framework. In youth associations on the other hand, mentors and mentees tend to come across one another via informal channels. The quality and duration of a mentoring relationship indicates the role played in the successful outcome of training or education (see Thomson/Zand, p. 434). Lasting relationships and strong emotional ties are important factors in successful mentoring (see Spencer 2006, p. 288). Relationships between volunteers and those they supervise are apparently stable when the younger members feel they are on an equal footing and realise that their capabilities are trusted (see O’Donoghue/Strobel 2007).

4 Sample

Youth associations are a very heterogeneous group. The purpose of choosing the associations for the “Study of youth associations” was to achieve maximum contrasts – for example in relation to the social backgrounds assumed and

³ As regards the “apparent ability to develop interest personally” see the article by Grotlüschen/Krämer in this volume.

philosophies of life. Questions were put to volunteers from the following associations:

- Bund der deutschen Landjugend (BDL; referred to below as the Rural Youth Association),
- Deutsche Jugendfeuerwehr (DJF; referred to below as the Youth Fire Brigade),
- IG-Metall Jugend (Youth Organization of the Metal Workers' Union; referred to below as the IGM Youth Group),
- A member-organised immigrant group that works closely with Jugendwerk der Arbeiterwohlfahrt (Youth Organization of the Workers' Welfare; referred to below as Member-organised Immigrant Group)
- Verband christlicher Pfadfinderinnen und Pfadfinder (Christian Boy and Girl Scouts; referred to below as the Scouts),
- An ultra soccer group (referred to below as Ultra Group).

The latter is one of a more informal nature that usually plays no role in any discourse about youth associations. However, the principles practised in youth associations of free will, self-organisation, participation and volunteering or work without payment also apply to ultra groups. The purpose of taking the Ultra Group into account is to include young people that traditional youth associations will have virtually no chance of reaching.

5 Method

The Duisberg-Essen sub project whose data is based on the Hamburg one, endeavours to identify the character of work in youth associations specific to social backgrounds and the associated processes of inclusion and exclusions that take place. Therefore, the Duisberg-Essen analysis of group workshops uncovers patterns typical of the association concerned. It also identifies people who don't comply with these patterns that are typical of the association.⁴ It is these volunteers in particular who are questioned in depth on a one-to-one basis in the Hamburg sub project using interviews based on guidelines. The interviews focus on subjective logic and standpoints.

5.1 Survey method used in the Hamburg sub project

A total of 40 interviews were conducted in the Hamburg sub project. Many were just asked in their capacity as mentees, some only in their capacity as mentors and some as both mentors and mentees at the same time. More men (n = 26) than women (n = 14) were interviewed, particularly because there are far more men in the IGM Youth Group, the Youth Fire Brigade and the Ultra Group.

In their associations' hierarchies, the mentees asked were below the level of ranked officials, but already play official roles and lead neighbourhood or district groups. This selection was made so that those working in the associations could still remember how their interest developed. On the other hand interviews with one or several holders of office would risk people talking about positions in the association in general and less about their own experience. In some cases the mentors are already active at a federal-state level. One full-time employee was also interviewed.

⁴ More detailed information on the Duisberg-Essen sub project can be found at: <https://www.uni-due.de/biwi/politische-bildung/jugendverbandsstudie>

Mentors and mentees were both asked about their experience, which is unusual in research: “Mentoring studies rarely include data from both mentors and mentees” (Thomson/Zand 2010, p. 443). Mentees and mentors are interviewed separately. Brake conducts research with Büchner on the transfer of education over several generations and recommends this method in order not “to suppress points of view which are specific to generations” (Brake 2006, p. 50).

In some cases it required enormous effort to a) attract people to take part in the group workshops at Duisburg-Essen University, which preceded the sub project illustrated here and b) to find a date for each association which suited all the interested parties. For in-depth individual interviews, the majority – apart from the Ultra Group and some mentors – were relatively easy to persuade because they were mostly talking about their favourite activity.

The analysis is carried out using the grounded theory (Strauss/Corbin 1996) but is not based on a theoretical *tabula rasa*. In fact it’s more the above-mentioned elements of the theory on how interest is developed and on mentoring relationships that are incorporated in the interpretation. The interpretation of the data is also influenced by Bourdieu’s approach regarding social backgrounds.

6 Empirical results

6.1 Interest development

To start with, the results on interest developed are given below and can be classified to the habitual axis on Grotlüschen’s model of interest development. Afterwards, the results of the model’s pragmatic axis will be discussed.

In the youth associations the volunteers become familiar with a wide range of interests. The diverse rationale in the associations, but also the dominance of different social backgrounds in each of the youth associations means that preferences vary as regards topics specific to associations. Therefore, the Youth Fire Brigade is interested in ways of being helpful and useful and the Scouts on the other hand are interested in adventures outdoors as a playful concept of an alternative universe. Setting up tents, making campfires and learning knots are mentioned as interests specific to the association.

On the habitual axis the link to the predominant social background⁵ in the association becomes especially clear where political persuasions are concerned. In the segments analysed in the Youth Fire Brigade and Rural Youth Association more formal aspects of democracy are examined⁶ (how do the institutions function and do elections take place?). The purpose of this approach is to include these aspects in existing structures and practical work, which again matches the practical tendency. In the Member-organised Immigrant Group the members asked have a similar focus, but politics doesn’t tend to be an integral part of activities undertaken by the association. Anti-racist activities predominate in the case of the interviewees from the Scouts which are driven by ideas of fellowship (between all people) and contain elements of an alternative universe. Above and beyond anti-racist activities, the IGM Youth Group interviewees engage in general socio-political activities. In terms of socio-criticism the focus is on collective opposition. The soccer Ultra Group interviewed is against commercialisation of soccer. To some extent they are against commercialisation in general and against the state (particularly the police) who they perceive as

5 The predominant social backgrounds (and customs) are revealed in the Duisburg-Essen sub project in particular. The results can be read there.

6 As regards “democracy and associations”, see the article by Riekman in this collection.

repressive. As a result, they are developing a kind of alternative culture. Therefore, all youth associations looked at take on a certain political and socialisational role.

Grotlüschen's phase model of interest development that includes the pragmatic axis of the model is confirmed because latency, expansion and competency phases when dealing with different areas of interests were identified. Young people and young adults become familiar with these during their work. This article will deal with work in the youth association itself as an area of interest. The majority of people have come to the association through their parents, other members of the family, fellow students, or their peers. The first contact with the association only came about in one case traditionally through an event:

“I attended a party in a barn and wasn't at all interested in the Rural Youth Association. But I really liked the people there and then I went to an open evening. And a week after the party I went again and then immediately became a member of the board”. (Emil, Rural Youth Association).

Apart from Stefan from the Scouts, only one other interviewee commented on Youth Associations as a subject of interest and the latency phase in which interest can dwindle:

“At one point we had quite a few chaotic people. Then it wasn't so much fun any more, even if I thought the fire brigade itself was interesting. So I took a break for nine months”. (Paul, Youth Fire Brigade).

In other subject areas, the interviewees found it easier to remember the latency phase. It's possible that people don't admit that they ever had doubts, or weren't immediately enthusiastic about the youth association. The fact that they can no longer remember, or ascribe interest to be personally motivated are other explanations.

Many interviewees report in detail about the expansion phase when everybody enthusiastically absorbs all the information about the area of interest. One example of this is a comment by an interviewee about his development regarding socio-political issues:

“I've become a youth representative and that's how I got into the local youth committee. And that's where they discussed working conditions, pay policy and in the local group we continued to talk about socio-political topics. [...] From the youth committee I joined the IG Metall Youth Association and then worked on the anti-racism group. I was keen to get involved there too. And that of course helped define me as a person. [...] There were many facets and we looked at other issues that ranged from discrimination to sexism and then feminist causes and gender theories. So that's what I'm doing”. (Nick, IGM Youth Group).

Some of the volunteers did reach the competency phase which is characterised by lobbying and asking questions about the subject. One young soccer ultra who very quickly rose to the inner circle of the Ultra Group, represented the group by writing articles or negotiating with club officials. Despite carrying out lobbying, he does question key motivations for his own involvement in the group and some of the Ultras' doctrines – for example criticism about the commercialisation of soccer which fall short of the mark:

“At the beginning I heard a lot of criticism about the commercialisation, along the lines of “We’re against modern soccer”. But after a while, I started to think that we can’t always be taking the moral high ground. [...] We can’t always be complaining that soccer’s lost its soul, but we should also be asking what kind of rationale is behind it. And that’s how I started getting interested in social and economic issues. [...] After all, do people really believe that soccer can function as a kind of social romantic biotope in a free market economy?” (Luca, Ultra Group).

In contrast to the Ultras’ widespread belief that “All cops are bastards”, he believes that society does need them sometimes too. He questions fundamental beliefs of the Ultras in order to encourage developments within the group. He thinks outside the box and wants to inspire others to do likewise. But despite the inconsistencies identified he’s not about to stop being involved with the group.

Several women, but no men report (interrupting or) halting their involvement with the association, in other words a distancing phase where they stop or have to stop working for the association. Two women discontinue (or interrupt?) their involvement with the association because they want to go to university. Differences in age and experience are some of the reasons given by one of them for this decision:

“In my pack, I feel that I’m out of it because I’m simply too old. [...] You aren’t told to go, but just have a feeling that you’re no longer wanted. [...] I can understand that when someone’s constantly saying that they know everything already and don’t want to do the same thing again”. (Annika, Scouts).

Therefore, main phases of interest development were identified in the “Study of youth associations” which are the same as the phases in the pragmatic axis of Grotlüschen’s theory of interest development.

6.2 Mentoring relationships

In youth associations mentoring relationships clearly play a major role. Mentoring chains are encountered where men support men, similar to the classic concept of the old boys’ network⁷. But it’s not clear whether this is due to the sample group and because more men were asked. Surprisingly, only some interviewees said that mentoring was important in order to recruit new young people.

“They said that in about five years the majority of them would have to leave. [...] Once they were over 30, they were no longer allowed to be a member of the youth association. [...] And it would of course be a shame if the project then came to an abrupt end”. (Nikolai, Member-organised Immigrant Group).

The majority of interviewees don’t give any reasons for mentoring. Some of them explicitly deny that it’s a necessity in order to recruit new young people. Even if mentoring plays an important role over all, there are a few people who aren’t

⁷ In a narrower sense, network structures imply student fraternities in the US and United Kingdom, but also in Germany. In this case however, the term is used in a wider sense to describe male network and mentoring structures.

mentored, but who then do admit that nobody in their environment is mentored. In the Ultra Group for example no dyads were identified.

There are two possible reasons for not disclosing mentoring processes. One could be that people believe they are self-motivated, the other could be a concern by mentors of any suspicion of manipulation or criticisms of unequal treatment. Some interviewees stress that they're giving nobody preferential treatment, or are at least trying to be fair. Between the two poles of self-motivation and avoiding manipulation there are many forms of mentoring and mentoring strategies.

Despite our original assumption, not just dyadic mentoring relationships, but also sandwich models are to be found, in which mentees are already mentoring someone else while being mentored themselves. For example, a local youth fire brigade officer coaches his successor while he's currently being prepared by his district youth fire brigade officer to be his successor. Again, generations are being skipped. Hendrik from the IGM Youth Group is coaching both Nick as his direct successor as well as successor Finn – in other words someone from the 3rd generation. He also chooses different mentoring strategies: He mentors Nick in an open, passive style, but he uses a veiled, active strategy on Finn.

In the case of *open mentoring strategies* the mentees realise that they are being mentored. Together they decide on career goals, as well as the steps taken to reach these goals, for example by attending certain courses or providing feedback on responsibilities undertaken. In the case of *veiled mentoring strategies* the mentors don't reveal that they want to train mentees or what the goal in doing so is. For example, the mentees were given tasks so that they could develop, but without making the reasons transparent. Hendrik describes this as "taking a look, asking questions and finding yourself with a job". He explains "taking a look" as follows:

"Come with us, or why not come with us? And then that's what you do".

He illustrates "Finding yourself with a job" as follows:

"Usually it's the case that once you've been there, you were immediately given jobs to do. The next time you have to turn up to tell them what the result has been. That's how it works sometimes". (Hendrik, IGM Youth Group).

In the case of *active mentoring strategies* the mentees are taken by the hand and shown important steps. The only case in the sample group of a woman coaching a woman is typical:

The former group leader "took me by the hand and brought me to meetings at a state level. And introduced me to completely different people. And she took me by the hand and sent me on this group-leader course". (Denise, Scouts)

In the case of *passive mentoring strategies* the mentors answer questions or wait for people to ask for help.

The volunteers comment that several conditions need to be in place for mentoring relationships to be effective. It's important that the mentees feel they're being taken seriously and are treated as equals. They also want to sense that mentors have confidence in their abilities and trust them. Trust is indicated by giving factual information on responsibilities to be undertaken and when people are given the chance to say no. However, some people also believe that applying

pressure or even forcing people is an effective mentoring tool. Mentees report that responsibilities that they believed were sheer impossible had helped them develop as people. The argument that it would be in the interests of the association is often sufficient. A positive attitude that indicates trust, along the lines of “You can do it best”, or the more pressurised version “Otherwise nobody will do it”, are applied.

6.3 Career and educational focuses

Some volunteers change their minds about career choices because they encounter new areas of interest and in some cases due to mentoring. But above all suggestions also come from families and from peers, as well as fellow students and friends. In the interview, one person in the sample group talked about the influence of the profession and informal mentoring in the youth association on his choice of job: In choosing a career, Stefan from the Scouts was influenced by his former group leader, who he sees as a role model, but also by the suggestions of his teacher.

Lia from the IGM Youth Group has clearly undergone the most radical change. First of all she worked as a mechatronics technician on a conveyor belt in a large company. She’s now following a higher education course due to the influence of the IGM Youth Group which is focused not only on collective opposition, but also on upward mobility. Originally Lia couldn’t imagine following a higher education course and she met resistance from her family:

“To me that was all SO far away. It wasn’t something I could grasp because my family’s working class. And once I told my parents about my decision to go on to higher education [...] they wanted to dissuade me. And because, as I already said, it’s something totally alien to my family”.

She gives the following reasons why she went on to do a higher education course:

“If the company does close here, [...] I’d be in a temping agency. [...] And in my case I thought the higher education course would get me out of here. I’m learning new skills”.

And the support provided by the association and a network of union members shows that this was successful. Her local youth-association secretary helped her to prepare for the entrance exam to a university. Union members at the place where the university is located helped her to find her way about and organise a room. In this way youth associations help people and advise people on job choices and in some cases provide ongoing support. As a result, they take on pedagogical and transitional management roles.

7 Summary and outlook

The “Study of youth associations” shows that mentoring processes help to develop interest in the mentees. As expected, in practice, mentoring and generating interest go hand in hand. In some cases, youth associations act as places where socialisation takes place, they help give a focus, change education and training strategies and play a role in career choices. It is probably not a good idea to delegate these responsibilities to youth associations. In the end, the effectiveness seems to lie in the voluntary nature of the associations, the atmosphere which is based on trust and the fact that everyone is treated on an equal footing.

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