

# On the Influence of Volunteerism upon College Students' Moral Identity

Si Chen<sup>1</sup>, Weiling Liang<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of International Relations, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Canton, China

<sup>2</sup>College at Center for Teacher Development, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Canton, China

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**Abstract:** Individual moral conscience is the origin and prerequisite of one's volunteerism while participating in voluntary service is an effective way to improve one's moral cultivation. By studying the status quos of college students' volunteerism, the author analyzes the correlation between volunteerism and moral identity. The author concludes that by helping college students internalize their volunteerism, their moral identity would be improved to a higher state, which in turns improves their individual morality.

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**\*Corresponding author:** Weiling Liang, wlingliang@outlook.com

## 1 Introduction

Voluntary service is an important angle for research on students' moral identity. By experiencing actual moral practice (*i.e.* participating in voluntary service), college students are able to internalize the received moral education through individual identity. It is in fact the advantage of the education-through-practice mechanism over the traditional model where college teachers depend solely on lecturing moral concepts and self-reflection. Students in lecture classes are not able to experience the real moral and emotional scenario, which is in turn unable to arouse the individual's resonance. In

fact, one can relate a student's moral identity status to their identity level of volunteerism (Youniss, 1981). At the same time, the study of the theory of moral identity also prompts us to reflect on whether we can find a better way to carry forward the spirit of volunteerism in college, with a view to promoting the continuous improvement of moral cultivation of college students.

## 2 Literature review

Moral Identity theory is a hot topic at the academia at present, which was put forwarded in the 1980s by an American scholar called Blasi (1976, 2004). He, by criticizing Kohlberg's moral cognition theory (Kohlberg, 1983), believes that moral cognition cannot directly lead to moral behavior which is instead triggered by individual's moral identity. Therefore, moral identity is a critical link for the transformation from moral cognition to moral behavior (Youniss, Yates, 1999). Other scholars such as Hart, Aquino and Youniss agreed to that and developed Blasi's theory mostly through empirical research by designing different scale models, using different methods and principles to conduct in-depth research on moral identity.

Aquino, a British psychologist, is among the first to use scales for quantitative measurement of moral identity. His measurement scale has since been adopted widely among scholars around the world. Together with Reed (Aquino, Reed, 2002), he argues that human moral qualities, values, and ethical behavior can represent a person's moral identity, and by referring

to Erickson's measurement of self-identification they think that moral identity can be observed from intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. Intrinsically, those with lower moral level are not without moral cognition, but rather such cognition does not have a dominant position in their self-identity. Similarly, the virtuous ones are praised as so only because their moral cognition is relatively closer to their moral identity. On the other hand, extrinsically, i.e. through the public dimension, one expresses his or her own moral identity through individual moral behavior in the public domain. Those with higher moral identity tend to take the initiative to seek opportunities to express their moral identity through moral behavior. However, it is important to note that as moral behavior occurs occasionally, one cannot measure one's intrinsic moral identity solely through his or her extrinsic moral behavior (Winterich, Mittal & Aquino, 2013).

The main experiment process of Aquino was that he first summarized 19 different human moral traits, then selected 9 of them as representative moral qualities through testing and validation: caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hard work, honest and kind, presupposing those 9 traits as what a moral person must have. Aquino et al. then asked the subjects to image how should someone or themselves think, feel, and act when they possess these nine moral qualities. Providing the preset imagination, the subjects were later tested for a total of 10 questions under intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. Questions under the former dimension included "Being a person with these traits makes me feel good"; "Being someone with these traits is an important part of me"; and "Being a person with these traits will make me feel ashamed" (reverse question). Those under the latter included "The books and magazines I read identify my possession of these traits" and "I pass on the fact that I possess these traits to others through a particular organization in which I am a member" (Wu, 2014).

### 3 Methods

Based on the volunteerism questionnaire of the predecessors, the author ran a pre-test, and then selected 34 questions from Aquino's research into two dimensions and four aspects as the questionnaire for this research. The survey took a parameter confidence of 95%, (Z value at 1.96 constant) and the absolute sampling error does not exceed 2.5%. Upon calculation, the author decided the final sample size at 1537. In

order to ensure that the number of valid samples meets the requirements, avoiding that the elimination of invalid samples after recovery would result in a reduction in the sample size, and to consider the human, financial and time costs, the author distributed 1,700 copies of the questionnaire.

The actual number of questionnaires recovered is 1828 copies, of which 1128 were collected online, the other 700 offline in hard copy. Among those offline, 667 were recovered with a recovery rate of 95.29%, 634 of them are valid ones. The other 33 copies are invalid because not all questions were answered, making them incomplete. To sum up, 1762 valid samples were collected for this research with an efficiency of 96.39%.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Volunteers

In terms of the sex ratio of college students who took part in the study, 720 are male at 40.9%, and 1042 female at 59.1%. According to the latest statistics released by China's Ministry of Education, by year 2016, the proportion of female undergraduate students in the country's undergraduate university system stands at 53.44%, and that of vocational colleges is a slightly lower at 51.17%, (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China, 2020). Most of the respondents of this study are from undergraduate universities and colleges. And particularly one of the universities is major in foreign language and culture studies, which usually enrolls more female students. These accounts for the slightly higher ratio of female respondents in this study. It can be seen that the gender ratio of this sample survey is controlled at a balance, reflecting the current trend of the rising proportion of female college students in China.

In terms of respondent's educational stage, there are 897 first-year students, or 50.9%, second-year students of 515, or 29.2%, 144 third-year students at 8.2%, and 140 fourth-year students at 7.9%, and 49 graduate students at 2.8%. Activities such as work placement, internship, thesis writing or application for higher degree of study inevitably resulted in the lower number of respondents at their sophomore and graduate year. In addition, generally speaking, students at first and second year of their study are more active in taking part in surveys, and interviews. We can therefore safely say that the educational background of the respondents to this study is in line with the actual situation.

From the perspective of political status, as 80% of the respondents are first- or second-year students whose probability of being accepted as political party members is relatively lower than those in year three and year four, only 105 respondents whose political status are party members accounting for 6%. It is worth mentioning that five of the respondents are democrats, which also shows that the Democratic Party is also very much concerned with absorbing the youth strength in higher education.

In terms of their religious beliefs, 94.2% of the respondents have no religious belief unlike the other 103. Among those who have religious belief, 50.5% or 52 believe in Buddhism., which is in line with the fact that Buddhism is still an important religion in the country with deeper roots and a broader mass base compared to other religions. However, the development of Christianity in our country is not to be underestimated, which accounts for 22.3% of all the students who have religion belief.

#### 4.2 Self-identity of volunteerism among college students

The survey data shows that the vast majority of college students have a higher degree of self-identity of volunteerism. On the question of "What do you think is the essence of volunteerism", 78.37% of the respondents consider it "social responsibility" as shown in Table 1. The number of respondents chose this definition is higher than that of the other six options and it is 10% higher than that of the second item "selfless contribution". Subjectively speaking, most college students have a correct and positive understanding of volunteerism under the educational context.

**Table 1.** Understanding of volunteerism essence of college students

	n.	percentage
charity spirit	615	54.52%
moral conscience	569	50.44%
selfless dedication	763	67.64%
unity and cooperation	629	55.76%
humanitarian emotion	649	57.54%
social responsibility	884	78.37%
Confucius spirit	78	6.91%
others	12	1.06%

Survey question: Which of the following do you think is the essence of volunteerism? (choose no more than 3 that apply)

#### 4.3 Self-identity of college students' volunteerism

**Table 2.** Volunteering willingness of college students

	N	Percentage
I agree to continue to volunteer as I agree with its social and moral value.	846	75%
I don't want to continue as I am occupied with other more valuable issues.	18	1.6%
Either is okay if I have time, I would continue, and if I don't I would stop volunteering.	251	22.25%
none of the above.	13	1.15%

Survey question: After certain volunteer experience, what is your opinion to volunteering now? (please choose one)

The report shows that 97% of respondents are willing to continue their volunteering service. Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents' answers to the question "after volunteering, how did your mentality change?" 75% responded as "(I am) willing to continue to participate in voluntary service, and I agree with its social value." 22% responded "not necessarily, I can continue if time permits, but if I am too occupied, I would drop it." These two types of respond accounts for 97% in total. From the above report on their awareness of volunteerism, we know that college students are mostly aware of the essence of volunteerism. With that in mind, we can draw the conclusion from data shown in Table 2 that college students have a relatively high level of self-identity of volunteerism or voluntary spirit. This shows that college students' understanding of volunteerism is not superficial, but that they have already constructed it into their self-identity, and have internalized into their mindset then transformed into individual moral practices.

**Table 3.** Gains after volunteering of college students

	n	percentage
I gained a spiritual satisfaction and happiness	965	85.55%
I received professional training and improved my ability.	344	30.5%
I improved my inter-personal communication and organization coordination ability.	804	71.28%
I gained social recognition and respects from others.	505	44.77%
I received voluntary certificates and relevant	371	32.89%
None of the above.	20	1.77%

Survey question: what did you gain most out of your volunteering? (please choose no more than 2 choices)

More than half of the volunteers consider spiritual satisfaction and happiness as the biggest gain from volunteering. College students generally have a high degree of recognition of the spirit of volunteerism. According to Table 3, only 20 % of college students agree to the statement that the greatest harvest of voluntary service is “volunteer service experience and related certificates”, or “receiving professional training, self-improvement”, which shows that college students do not attach great importance to “utilitarian” gain. On the contrary, the spiritual gain such as “satisfaction, happiness” (Yates, Youniss, 1996), “social recognition, respect for others” is more important.

**Table 4.** Access to voluntary activity of college students

	n	percentage
Compulsory voluntary activity organized by school.	119	10.55%
Optional voluntary activity organized by school	708	62.77%
Through advertisement or introduced to voluntary activity by others.	166	14.72%
Voluntary activities organized by ourselves.	91	8.07%
Other access.	44	3.9%

Survey question: what is your access to voluntary service (please choose only one choice)

More than 60% of college students volunteering in activities organized by schools out of their own will. Looking at their access to the voluntary activities, 60% of college students report that they participate in voluntary service by taking part in activities organized by schools. Around 10% of students say that they volunteer out of the compulsory requirement by schools while 20% participate in voluntary activities organized by themselves or through other social organizations. The statistics shows that the social identity of college students' volunteerism is getting higher than the early stage where students were not willing to volunteer as the pattern and organization of volunteering was not mature enough, which is a pleasant improvement. In addition, the research data shown in Table 4 also reflects that school is an effective guarantee for students' participation in voluntary service.

#### 4.4 College student's volunteering status quos

**Table 5.** Types of voluntary activity participated by college students

	n	percentage
Large-scale events, national or international events organized by the government or schools.	382	33.87%
Emergency incidents and emergency rescue service	72	6.38%
Volunteer activities for the Country People Program or community services.	731	64.8%
Oversea voluntary service	23	2.04%
Poverty alleviation support programs such as University Students Serving the West Project, and Post-graduate Supporting Education Project	49	4.34%
Environmental voluntary service.	552	48.94%
None of the above.	157	13.92%

Survey question: what type of activity did you volunteer? (choose all that apply)

Generally speaking, Chinese universities and colleges have carried out various forms and a large quantity of voluntary activities. We assume that students' volunteering experience may vary a lot in terms of types of activities. However, when being asked what types of voluntary activities have, they participate, most college students as shown in Table 5, affecting by their study pressure, prefer to participate in accessible voluntary service such as the Volunteer Activities for the Country People Program or community services, accounting 64.8%. The second popular type of activity is environmental voluntary service at 48.94%. The third most popular type of voluntary activity for college students is large-scale events held by the government or important conferences at home and abroad, nearly one third of students respond to that. The reason behind may be that organizers of these events and conference prefer college students as volunteer as students are perceived as having relatively high quality and quick response for volunteering.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 The basis of college students' volunteerism is moral conscience which in turn is an

### **important factor in the cultivation of one's social responsibility.**

The two are highly homogenous regarding the sense of social responsibility as the essence of college students' volunteerism is a manifestation of individual moral conscience, which is actually equidistant from the perspective of moral conscience. Social responsibility can be understood as the superposition of the moral conscience of college students and their recognition of the role of volunteers. In other words, the moral conscience of college students can be embodied as a sense of social responsibility through voluntary service, which reflects the essence of college students' volunteerism as a form of practical moral spirit. According to the survey, more than half of the respondents chose "moral conscience", which also confirms from one side that the moral conscience of college students is the premise and foundation of volunteerism.

In addition, only 89 respondents understand the spirit of volunteerism as "Confucian spirit" accounting for 6.91 %. That in the one hand demonstrates the basic understanding of volunteerism of college students. on the other hand, it shows that volunteerism in Chinese context has not been integrated with traditional virtues, and that volunteerism has not yet been a part of our moral and ethical mindset. The understanding of volunteerism of college students is deeply foreignized, which makes it difficult to promote volunteerism. One way to mitigate such effect is that we integrate much more Chinese virtue in voluntary activities as a way to cultivate a type of volunteerism with Chinese feature, instead of blindly following what other society does.

### **5.2 The core of college students' volunteerism is the humanitarian emotion of dedication and mutual love.**

From the perspective of moral ethics, selfless dedication is at a higher level than social responsibility and moral conscience, because sharing the same basis of altruism with social responsibility and moral conscience, dedication involves a second sense of selflessness. And understanding the essence of volunteerism as a humanitarian emotion, college students have actually taken it one step forward from moral conscience to individual obligation and responsibility. From the survey results, we can see that proportions of students understand volunteerism as "selfless dedication", "humanitarian emotions", "unity and cooperation"

all exceed 50% at 67.64%, 57.54% and 55.76 % respectively. We can therefore say that college students correctly understand the essence of volunteerism.

It is worth noting that the number of students understand volunteerism as a "charitable spirit" is not in the minority, accounting for 54.52%. This shows that we are heavily influenced by foreign cultures in the process of promotion and development of voluntary service in our country, which demonstrates on the high proportion of students (54.52%) understanding volunteerism by referring to the foreign concept of charity.

### **5.3 Voluntary service is an effective entry point for college students' moral education.**

At present, there is always a voice in the society that the volunteer spirit of college students has been replaced and undermined by too many opportunities and interests, losing its original connotation. Those who hold this view infer and judge volunteerism only from some negative phenomena of moral education work in colleges and universities, without noticing that the problem lies in the education of moral cognition and identity which at present is mainly through indoctrination. We learnt from the survey that volunteerism is achieved or obtained mainly through moral practices such as voluntary activity. Students understand the essence of volunteerism by way of participating in services, which is a service-learning process and a completely different approach than indoctrination. Another point that we learnt from the survey is that regardless of the numerous choices and pressures incurred therefrom, students are able to perceive volunteerism as an integral part of self-identity and demonstrate it through practical services. We can thus conclude that voluntary service is an effective practice for moral education in college, through which students can cultivate and integrate a correct understanding of volunteerism into their self-identity. That in turn cast an effective and proactive effect on moral education of college students and their comprehensive quality.

### **5.4 Strengthen the promotion of volunteerism among college students.**

The survey shows that 76 students at the percentage of 5 have involved in relatively difficult and long-term voluntary service projects such as Western Plan, Graduate Mission. This indicates that some college students have a very strong sense of social

responsibility, deeply integrate and unify selfless dedication and individual dream and beliefs into serving the country. These college student volunteers are undoubtedly the most vivid "spokesman" of volunteerism, which is of great value to our promotion of volunteerism in college. They serve as exemplary models which can help us to guide students to cultivate students' values and their outlook on life. Model education should therefore be highly promoted in the whole society in order to improve the development of volunteer culture to a higher level.

In addition, 6.38% of the respondents have participated in voluntary work in emergency incidents, reserves, which should raise concern for college management considering that current knowledge education on safety prevention, medical, rescue skills for college students is still insufficient. Professional training on such aspects should be another effort to be made for the sake to strengthen students' self-protection skills and compacity, being a helper instead of a trouble-maker in voluntary service.

## 6 Conclusion

As Habermas put it in *Modernity: Unfinished Engineering*, "The gains made through professional manipulation and reflection in culture cannot be carried out without preconditions for everyday practice" (Wang, 2005). On the contrary, with the rationalization of culture, the traditional essence of living space is devalued and is in danger of poverty. For college students living in the present day, they will be more eager than ever to find the self-spiritual world in the real world, especially the moral uplift, to find a home to house the lonely soul.

Participating in voluntary service is an effective way for college students to improve their individual moral cultivation. The premise and foundation of the spirit of volunteerism is derived from the moral conscience of the individual, and voluntary service is a practical manifestation of the need for the promotion of moral cultivation in individual student. That is the reason why college students shoulder their moral obligations out of their own will in public service. Being one way

to promote individual moral cultivation, volunteering would inevitably become the whole nation's moral life as long as everyone pitches in. Through the practice of volunteering, college students have gained a wider and more varied interpersonal experience, learned about the living conditions of people of different classes, and made them more sensitive to improving the living conditions of our society, and more willing to contribute to helping others, thus enhancing their moral sense of responsibility. College volunteers thus push individual's moral identity to a new height through the internalization of volunteerism, and realize the sublimation of individual ideology and morality.

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