Voluntary work, informal help and trust: Changes in Finland

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Abstract

This study examines participation in voluntary work and informal help of another household and their connection to trust in Finland. I ask what changes have taken place in participation in voluntary work, informal help and trust in the past ten years. I use the Time Use Survey conducted at Statistics Finland as the data material. According to the definition of Statistics Finland's Time Use Survey, volunteering may be acting as a secretary, fund-raising, sports instruction, companionship service or other such organised activity. Participation in voluntary work in Finland is at a high level. The concept of social capital originates from the view that in order to understand well-being of societies, account should be taken of not only the economy but also of the social dimension of society, such as the ability to cooperate and the networks supporting it. Although Finland seems to have a strong foundation for communality and social capital, communal activity and social capital are not evenly divided between different population groups. Participation in voluntary work is connected to a high socio-economic group and education. Households of highly educated and upper-level employees received also the most informal help, while households of workers, unemployed and pensioners gained the least informal help. A functioning civic society with voluntary work through organisations and informal help can only supplement the basic services of the welfare state, but cannot replace them.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Hans Schmeets / Rik Linssen, Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University, the Netherlands

Keywords: voluntary work; informal help; trust; social capital

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1. Introduction: Voluntary work as a part of social capital

This study examines participation in voluntary work, informal help of another household and trust, and changes in these as a part of social capital. The data used here have been taken from the interview data in Statistics Finland’s Time Use Surveys. Voluntary work is a part of civic society (Yeung, 2002); it is beneficial to society but is only partly included within the scope of productive work (Pääkkönen, 2010). In recent years, voluntary work has often been associated with the discussion of social capital.

Even though the roots of the concept of social capital can be traced at least to the early years of the 1900s, active scholarly discussion about social capital picked up at the end of the last millennium in particular. The concept stems from the view that in order to understand the welfare of societies, the social dimension of society, such as the capacity for cooperation and the networks supporting this, must be taken into consideration, as well as economic output. The concept has also been linked to discussions on the position of the welfare state and division of responsibility between the welfare state’s services and civic society’s support networks. (Ilmonen, 2000). Social capital has also been associated with discussions on changes in the social structure, where concern has been expressed that advanced individualisation has weakened the building of communities (see, for example, Haatanen, 2000). The field of research of social capital has become multidisciplinary, and there still is no common definition for social capital.

One pioneer in the study of social capital is Pierre Bourdieu (1986), who utilised the concept while investigating prevailing cultural structures of inequality in French society. Pierre Bourdieu defines social capital as the sum of those resources that originate in networks of acquaintances or memberships of groups. These networks have capital that their members can utilise. Social capital helps in both becoming part of the networks and in using the networks as one’s own resources. The extent of social capital is influenced by both the size of the relationship network and the extent and quality of resources of other members of the network. Social capital has a structural connection with other material and symbolic pools of resources, promoting their accumulation.

Current studies of social capital have been influenced by James Coleman and Robert D. Putnam. Both have highlighted the importance of social capital consisting of networks, norms of reciprocity and trust as a resource for communities. Coleman (1988), who systemised the concept, paid attention to the firming up of social networks, which he feels improve communication and maintain standards in the close community. Putnam meanwhile has emphasized the role of civic virtues as a success factor in communities. He has applied the concept of social capital in his studies on differences in regional development in Italy (Putnam, 1993) and later in his works concerning the United States (Putnam, 2000).

In recent years, international discussion has been influenced by the OECD’s way of analysing social capital. The objective of this has been to measure social capital. According to the OECD’s definition, social capital comprises participation in the activities of organised groups and voluntary work, networks and the support obtained via these, trust and participation in civic activities. Networks include informal networks and their activities, such as unpaid help in another household, obtaining help from others and contact with friends and acquaintances. Participation in civic activities includes civic and political party activities and also contacting politicians or officials and signing appeals (OECD, 2001, Pääkkönen, 2010). The OECD’s definition has formed the basis of, for instance, the Australian and British national offices of statistics’ projects that measure social capital. In Finland, Hannu Pääkkönen (2006) has studied, using Statistics Finland’s Time Use Survey for 1999-2000 as the source data, what kinds of people participated in social capital activities, as specified by the OECD, and how much time they used for these.
In statistical surveys, trust is one key indicator for social capital. In the theory of trust, distinction is made between the trust between people and the confidence created by institutions and agreements. Trust between people is commonly divided into generalised trust, or trust shown not only to people one already knows, but strangers as well, and particularised trust, or trust shown towards people belonging to the same network, such as family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers and other acquaintances. In addition, the OECD regards trust, as well as networks and participation, as one fundamental dimension of social capital. In the OECD’s research framework, trust is studied both as general and particularised trust and as trust shown towards institutions (Alanen, Iisakka, Nieminen and Simpura, 2005).

2. Robert D. Putnam: Let’s go bowling together

Robert D. Putnam regards social capital as a characteristic of a community. According to Putnam (1993), the concept of social capital can be summed up as a relatively long-term resource at the disposal of the actors (individuals, communities or society) that is part of the social structure consisting of three components, or social networks, mutual trust between the actors and norms of reciprocity. Putnam, in other words, discusses social networks as the first element of social capital. He divides social networks into horizontal and vertical types, of which the former are built on equality, an even distribution of status and power, and the latter on relations of hierarchy and dependence. According to Putnam (1993), horizontal networks are better than vertical ones, as a vertical network does not support or uphold relations of trust and cooperation. Groups engaged in civic activities are likely to be organised horizontally as they link group members who are dissimilar but equal. Ties between the members of groups of this type, such as sports clubs, are usually weak, while the network as a whole is strong, as networks are likely to be an embodiment of a large quantity of mutual trust and reciprocal norms of cooperation.

Another element of social capital is relations of trust. Social exchanges cannot work without trust between the actors. The deeper the trust, the easier social exchanges and cooperation become. The third component of social capital is social norms shared by the community, which must primarily be reciprocal. Communities where the norm of generalised reciprocal exchange is followed are able to solve problems efficiently through collective cooperation. In addition, a generalized norm of reciprocity creates good possibilities of establishing trust, unimpeded communication and well-functioning social networks.

In his book ”Making Democracy Work” (1993), Putnam explains the more favourable economic development in Northern Italy than in the South by the more advanced social capital in the north. All in all, social capital enables the development of a confidential climate of opinions and norms at the level of society. These factors together, on the other hand, facilitate a favourable economic development and working democracy in government. After completing his research in Italy, Putnam shifted his focus to the United States and the fluctuations in social capital that have taken place in that country over the long term. Putnam found that social capital has been declining since the 1960s. According to Putnam, many problems of the American society are crystallised in the declining tendencies of the social capital, including a decline in memberships in organisations, the voting rate and volunteering. Putnam seeks the reasons for this in general social and cultural changes, including women’s extensive participation in the labour force, the entertainment industry, social mobility and the increased number of divorces. This undermines trust at the level of society at large, and the possibilities for anonymity and happiness decline. (Putnam, 2000.) The title of his book, Bowling alone (2000), reflects a situation that Putnam uses as an example of the decline in the social capital. Even if Americans were more likely to take up bowling as a hobby, the membership in bowling leagues went down, as increasing numbers of Americans go bowling without belonging to a league. This is an indication of the privatisation of free time (see also Kankainen, 2007). Has social capital declined also in Finland?
2.1. Time use survey

The Time Use Survey is a sample survey, in which the participants kept accurate records of their time use for two 24-hour periods. They were also interviewed. For example, the survey looks at working time, time spent on domestic work, sleeping and having meals, free-time activities as well as how people spend time together and where the activities take place. It also examines how the time of the day, day of the week and seasons affect the rhythms of time use.

Statistics Finland has carried out four national time use surveys at approximately ten-year intervals. The Time Use Survey has been conducted in 1979, 1987–1988, 1999–2000 and 2009-2010. Some 20 European countries will conduct a harmonised time use survey in 2008–2013. Following Eurostat’s recommendation, the data for the last two Time Use Surveys in Finland were collected by households. In the first two surveys, samples consisting of individuals were used. Efforts were made to interview all household members that were aged 10 or older. Eurostat’s guidelines allow the use of nationally compiled interview questions. Respondents also wrote in their diaries a freely worded description of what they were doing with an accuracy of 10 minutes on two days selected beforehand. It was possible to record two simultaneous activities in the diary.

Data for the survey were collected between April 2009 and May 2010. The sample comprised the members aged 10 or over in 4,499 households. The interviews were computer-aided face-to-face or telephone interviews. They were conducted by interviewers working for Statistics Finland around Finland. A total of 4,645 people participated in the interviews. Response rate was 52 per cent. Diary was kept by 3,800 people on 7,480 days. The dairy was acceptably returned by 41 per cent of them. In previous surveys, the response rates were clearly higher. Weighting was used to adjust for non-response bias. The weights were standardised to correspond with data obtained from population statistics and various registers.

The basic features of time use are slow to change. Over three decades, however, gradual evening out of gender differences in time use can be observed. Nevertheless, men continue to spend more time on gainful employment than women do, and they have more free time than women do. Women, on the other hand, continue to do the majority of domestic work. These trends in time use can also be observed in other industrialised countries (Fisher & Robinson, 2011).

2.2. Voluntary work in the Time Use Survey

Voluntary work is commonly defined in research by way of its unpaid and voluntary nature; it is an unpaid and unforced activity done for the benefit of other people or the community (Pessi & Oravasaari, 2010). Pessi (2011) notes that voluntary work is often treated as unpaid service work, so that only activities in formally organised organisations that are maintained by paid staff and to which voluntary work offers a significant additional resource are regarded as voluntary work. This way of thinking is very traditional, and it does not accommodate, for instance, activism-type voluntary activities. However, it is possible to diverge this view by emphasising, in addition to altruism, activities for the benefit of shared objectives in voluntary work. The key activity areas, besides help, include various peer support groups and campaigns, and similarly all kinds of activism, too. The roles of voluntary workers are not precisely defined in advance, rather the workers can introduce and implement their own ideas and even take complete responsibility for the activities. The organisations do not even need to be officially organised, instead they can be informal, unregistered circles and groups.
Robert A. Stebbins (2004) examines voluntary activities with regard to use of time, by dividing the time used for them into serious, casual and project-based leisure time. Typically, command of a skill and a desire to learn something new are required of workers in voluntary activities based on demanding leisure time. Often this kind of voluntary work is done in the areas of physical exercise, art or culture, for example, as a sports coach, but also in voluntary work in the social sector, expertise acquired via training is often needed. Voluntary activities based on relaxing leisure time are open to everyone and do not require special skills. In voluntary work based on projects, the commitment is short-term or even a one-off.

In Statistics Finland’s Time Use Survey, respondents are asked whether they have carried out voluntary work for the benefit of some organisation or group. The reference periods were four weeks and 12 months. On one hand, the question concerns work done for the benefit of an association, organisation or group, such as secretarial work, collection of money or leading a club, and on the other hand, work focused on individual people and help, such as caring for children or the elderly, which is organised via some association, circle or group. Thus, the scope of voluntary work is taken to include activities happening through all kinds of organisations, via which the association’s or group’s objectives are fulfilled. The definition is not influenced by whether the goals of the activities are generally approved or not, and an example is the release of animals from cages. Pessi (2011) notes that voluntary activities should be considered from the widest perspectives. Statistics Finland’s definition of voluntary work in the Time Use Survey covers the traditional perspective of informal help, including activism from the civic-society perspective, and the varying degrees of commitment mentioned by Stebbins. Voluntary work can also be regarded as including informal help that takes place without the involvement of an organisation (Pääkkönen, 2010). Unpaid help in another household and receiving help from others are one dimension of the OECD’s definition of social capital.

3. Changes in participation in voluntary work: empirical results

3.1. Participation in voluntary work is quite common

The results for the 2009 Time Use Survey indicate that participation in voluntary work has remained unchanged over the past ten years. Nearly one third of people aged ten or over (29%) had done voluntary work in the four weeks prior to the survey, and during the past 12 months nearly 40 per cent (see Figure 1). Men did voluntary work slightly more than women did, but the differences are small. Examined by age group, it can be seen that middle-aged people (aged 45 to 64) did voluntary work most. Highly educated people did more voluntary work than people with a lower level of education (see Figure 2). When examining by socio-economic group, voluntary work by agricultural entrepreneurs had grown strongly, and they did voluntary work the most. Other self-employed people and upper-level employees also did a lot of voluntary work. Regional differences were not large, but in Western Finland and especially in the countryside, voluntary work was done slightly more than elsewhere\(^a\).

\(^a\)Classifications are Statistics Finland’s official classifications. Except for students, socio-economic group largely corresponds with the concept of labour market status that is used in Statistic’s Finland’s Labour Force Survey. If an interviewee was both student and employed, socio-economic group was determined by the activity on which the largest amount of time was used per week. In respect of employed people, the classification follows Statistics Finland’s Classification of socio-economic groups. In respect of post-primary education, the variable of level of education was formed based on Statistics Finland’s Register of Completed Education and Degrees. Education at the primary level and below it was classified on the basis of interview data.
Figure 1. Number of people having done voluntary work in the course of four weeks by gender and age in 1999 and 2009, population aged 10 or over, per cent

Figure 2. Number of people having done voluntary work in the course of four weeks by education and socio-economic group in 1999 and 2009, population aged 15 or over, per cent
3.2. Most voluntary work was done in sports and athletics clubs

Most voluntary work was done in sports and athletics clubs. Voluntary work in residential associations, village or housing corporation committees was also popular with respect to other forms of voluntary work among both men (8%) and women (6%). Voluntary work was also widespread in religious societies and congregations (4%) and diverse hobby organisations (5%).

Gender was a significant factor in deciding the kind of voluntary work practised. Not that many changes have taken place in this in the last ten years. Men participated more than women in the voluntary work of sports and athletics clubs, residential associations, village and housing corporation committees, nature and environmental associations and diverse hobby organisations. Women, in turn, participated more than men in the voluntary work of health and social organisations, religious societies, agricultural and home-economics advisory organisations, and activities of parent-teacher associations of day-care homes and schools. According to Pääkkönen (2010), similar gendered divisions have been detected in Canada and Australia as well.

3.3. Children’s and young people’s participation in voluntary work has diminished considerably

Even though there seem to have been no changes in voluntary work at the level of total population in the past ten years, one change is clear: voluntary work has diminished significantly among children and young people. While ten years ago nearly one third (28%) of those aged 10 to 14 took part in voluntary work, in 2009 only one fifth (19%) of children of that age did. Participation in voluntary work by young people aged 15 to 24 has also diminished. In contrast, those aged 65 or over did more voluntary work than ten years ago.

Young people aged 10 to 14 participated most in the voluntary work of sports and athletics clubs. Their share has somewhat grown in the past ten years. Slightly fewer than a tenth of them had taken part in that type of voluntary work. Voluntary work in sports clubs was practised nearly to the same degree in all age groups. Only those aged 65 or over took part in the voluntary work of sports clubs less than other age groups, but their share had increased most over the past ten years.

Voluntary work was done most in political parties and professional associations by middle-aged people aged 45 to 64, and of them just four per cent were involved. In other age groups, the figure was only around one per cent. In cultural and art organisations and other clubs, voluntary work was done most by those aged 45 to 64. Women aged 65 or over were active particularly in religious societies and congregations and in voluntary work done in health and social organisations.

Doing voluntary work in various clubs has grown in the past ten years in all age groups. It is also visible from other research results that associations related to diverse leisure-time interests have improved their position when examining both the establishment figures and participation in associations, at the same time as political and professional associations have lost their support (Siisiäinen & Kankainen, 2009; Hanifi 2006).

3.4. Agricultural entrepreneurs have several responsibilities and confidential posts

Nearly one fifth (18%) of those aged 15 or over had responsibility and confidential posts in associations or elsewhere, with men having slightly more than women (see Figure 3). Among those aged 65 or over, only around one tenth had responsibility or confidential posts. Twenty-nine per cent of those with tertiary level degrees had responsibility or confidential posts. When examining by socio-economic group, agricultural entrepreneurs (35%) and upper-level employees (29%) had the most responsibility or confidential posts (see Figure 4).
Figure 3. Responsibility and confidential posts in 1999 and 2009, population aged 15 or over, per cent

Figure 4. Number of people having helped another household in the course of four weeks by gender and age in 1999 and 2009, population aged 10 or over, per cent
3.5. Friends, neighbours and co-workers helped most

Unsupported by any organisation, another household had been helped free of charge or for a small compensation by 59 per cent of the respondents in the course of four weeks before the survey (see Figure 4). The number is approximately the same as ten years ago. Men and women had helped almost equally. Working-age people (aged 25 to 64) had helped most (65%). Although those aged 65 or over helped less than other age groups, their share had increased over the past ten years. In contrast, children and young people (aged 10 to 24) had given help less than ten years ago.

Employed people gave informal help the most (see Figure 5). Ten years ago, this was so for housekeepers. There are no significant differences between occupational groups, and no great changes have occurred over the last ten years. Agricultural entrepreneurs gave more help than ten years ago. However, the number of helpers had fallen sharply among housekeepers. Only pensioners or chronically ill people gave less help than home-makers. Nevertheless, informal help by pensioners had increased over the past ten years. Help provided by men and women differs in its content, in a similar way to housework in general. Women helped most frequently in childcare, shopping, cooking and cleaning. Men, in turn, helped in repair and building work, transport and removals, as well as in shopping and running of errands. The one who was helped depended mostly on the age of helpers. Help was most often given to friends, co-workers or neighbours. Nearly one third of those aged 25 to 44 had helped their own or their spouse’s parents. Those aged 45 to 64 helped their own or their spouse’s parents more than ten years ago, which probably results from the ageing of the population. Grandchildren had been helped by slightly more than one tenth of those aged 65 or over, and hardly any changes have taken place here in the last ten years.
3.6. Unemployed and pensioner households received less help than others

In four weeks preceding the Time Use Survey, nearly one half (49%) of the respondents to the Survey had received help from a friend, relative or neighbour in work connected with their household (see Figure 6). The number is the same as ten years ago. Help was most often received for childcare. The most assistance had been received by home-makers. There was not much difference in giving help between employed and unemployed households, but unemployed households got less help than employed households did. Households of pensioners and chronically ill people also received less help than all households, on the average. Households of highly educated people received more help than less educated ones, and when examining by socio-economic group, households of entrepreneurs and upper-level employees got more help than households of those in worker occupations.

![Figure 6. Number of people that received help from a private person in the course of four weeks by gender, education and socio-economic group in 1999 and 2009, population aged 15 or over, per cent](image)

The Time Use Survey also inquired whether the respondent’s household had purchased services from some enterprise, municipality or association in the four weeks before the Survey. Twenty-seven per cent had bought some service for household-related work. Most services had been purchased by highly educated, entrepreneurs and upper-level employees.

Although help was received most for childcare, only one per cent of the respondents had bought childcare services. Agricultural entrepreneurs had bought childcare services (7%) the most. Six per cent of the population had bought cleaning services, and twelve per cent of those aged 65 or over. Sixteen per cent of those aged 65 or over had received help with cleaning from a relative or friend. Seven per cent of those aged 65 or over had bought food preparation services, and the percentage is the same as for receiving help in cooking. It appears that for aged people purchased services offer an alternative to help provided by relatives or friends or supplement the help received.
3.7. Upper-level employees trusted people most in general

The 2009 Time Use Survey for the first time includes questions measuring trust. The questions have been chosen so that they enable the study of various forms of trust. The same statements were also used in the 2002 Leisure Survey, so that it is possible to obtain time-series data to some extent. The trust questions are based on trust indicators used in international surveys (ISSP, WVS). However, they have been rephrased, and also their validity has been tested via cognitive interviews at Statistics Finland’s Survey Laboratory. (Kallio-Peltoniemi, Kokkonen and Hanifi, 2009).

Based on the test results, it was noticed that trust is a multi-faceted entity that is difficult to measure. All in all, it was relatively easy for the respondents to answer the questions measuring trust. However, during the testing process it became clear that the approaches of the respondents to questions sometimes differed greatly from each other. The statement describing generalised trust measured most precisely whatever it was intended to measure. (Kallio-Peltoniemi, Kokkonen and Hanifi, 2009).

Generalised trust is the trust in people the respondent feels generally. It is implicit in simple, everyday interactions with others, such as chance encounters with others or exchange situations where the other party is unknown. Generalised trust is described by the statement “In general people can be trusted”. At the level of the total population, 85 per cent agree at least to some degree with this statement, and one quarter fully agree. Upper-level employees had the most generalised trust, of whom 94 per cent agree at least to some degree with the statement, and nearly one third (30%) fully agree. Informal trust is defined here as trust in a particular group of people. Informal trust was measured via the statement “I trust most people living in my area”. At the level of total population, 87 per cent agree at least to some degree with this statement, and 40 per cent fully agree. Men trusted people living in the same area more than women did. Agricultural entrepreneurs and people living in the country trusted most people living in their area. Institutional trust refers to trust in societal institutions, such as the government, the police, hospitals and the courts. People believe that these institutions take reasonable decisions in the administration of their duties, and these which are considered to be linked to the acceptability of their actions. Intrinsic to institutional trust too is the perceived trustworthiness and reliability of the actors that represent the institution, such as officials and doctors. Trust in institutions was measured via the statement “People like me don’t have any say about what the authorities do”. At the level of total population, 57 per cent agree at least to some degree with this statement, while 28 per cent fully agree. Young adults (aged 25 to 44), highly educated and upper-level employees trusted in institutions the most and in their opportunity to have a say in matters.

Based on earlier studies (Hanifi, 2006), trust and participation seem to be connected to one another. Those active in associations had more generalised, informal and institutional trust than the population on average, and those active in associations also participated in different types of informal civic activities, such as demonstrations or writing to newspaper editors, more than the population on average. However, those who did not participate in association activities at all, trusted other people and the state less than the population on average did. Thus, the observation conversely supports Putnam’s understanding of social capital.

4. Voluntary work, civic society and social capital: conclusions

4.1. Social capital has not diminished in Finland, but it accumulates for high socio-economic groups of people

Judging by the 2009 Time Use Survey, trust in Finland is relatively strong, and participation in voluntary work is high when compared to other countries globally. In the comparison of 14 European countries made by
Pääkkönen (2010) on the basis of time-use data for the past 10 years, Finland was placed in the top group. In international comparisons, Finland and the other Nordic countries have traditionally shown high levels of social capital. At the level of the whole population, social capital has not diminished in Finland.

Even though there seems to be a strong foundation of social capital in Finland, on the basis of other studies different forms of capital also seem to be accumulating for certain groups of people in Finland (for example, Siisiäinen and Kankainen, 2009; Sanaksenaho, 2006; Hanifi, 2009). Participation in voluntary work is strongly connected to a high socio-economic group and education. The unemployed, the chronically ill and pensioners are involved in voluntary activities and other civic activities less than others, and they also trusted other people and institutions less than the other population groups did.

Children’s and young people’s participation in voluntary activities has diminished considerably over the last 10 years. There are probably many reasons for this. Even though the amount of leisure time has, according to the Time Use Survey, increased during the last 10 years, nowadays a large number of different activities compete for young people’s leisure time. Children and young people have increased their use of the Internet in particular during the last 10 years. An examination of the relationship between the Internet and civic society would be important, because according to the results of the Time Use Survey almost all Internet users used it for searching for information (Pääkkönen and Hanifi, 2011). Also, obtaining information has been specified as the most important motive for association activities (Kankainen, 2007).

It is also worth noting that according to Pessi (2011), one half of young people not participating in voluntary activities say that if requested they would be prepared to get involved with activities. Almost 70 per cent of young people would also be willing to participate in voluntary activities organised by their school or employer during school or working hours. Schoultz (2010), who has studied political participation of the young, notes that the older generation often regards young people as apathetic, because they do not participate in traditional political activities. However, the forms of participation of the younger generation may go unnoticed by the older generations because they are manifested in forms other than the traditional organisational activities; young people already live in conditions that are described in studies demonstrating counter- and stealth-democracy, so people want to influence decision making, for example, by participating in demonstrations or boycotts and by signing appeals, i.e. from outside the system.

It is true that political participation and voluntary work done within it have lost their support. However, this does not just apply to the young, but people of all ages. Since the 1980s, a trend has been visible away from party-political and trade-union participation towards leisure activities and particularly towards sports and athletics clubs, and this change can be seen clearly in voluntary work as well. However, interest in politics has grown during the 21st century in all age groups (Schoultz, 2010), and also institutional trust is high particularly among the young and young adults.

Indications of the accumulation of social capital can also be detected when examining informal help between friends or acquaintances. The youngest and oldest people helped others the least. There were no great differences between employed people in giving help. However, households of highly educated and upper-level employees received the most help, while households of those in worker occupations, unemployed and pensioners gained the least help. Expressed more strongly, one can say that the possibility of relatives and friends help is weakest where it is needed the most and strongest where the resources are already the greatest. In addition, wide-ranging population studies like the Time Use Survey do not probably even reach those in the weakest position of all.
Therefore, it does not seem possible that voluntary activities and support of a close network could replace the basic services of a welfare state if one wishes to keep the services available to all (Siisiäinen and Kankainen, 2009: Pessi, 2011). On the contrary, international studies seem to indicate that cutbacks in welfare services also undermine possibilities for voluntary work. In countries with an extensive public sector, distances between people are shorter and people trust each other more, which facilitates social interaction (Patulny, 2005; Kouvo and Kankainen, 2009). In voluntary work, trust appears both as reciprocity and shared values. Participation in voluntary work both promotes and requires trust; you are unlikely to take part in voluntary work if you believe there is a good chance that others will take advantage of you. The feeling of reciprocity enhances commitment to voluntary activities. Both voluntary work and a working public sector spring from the same basic values, and in Finland in particular, the public sector is a product of active work by the NGOs (Siisiäinen and Kankainen, 2009). A precondition for active NGOs, on the other hand, is voluntary work: a study by Pessi and Oravasaari (2010) shows that for nearly all NGOs, voluntary activities were in some way part of the organisation’s operation.

4.2. Social capital and the future

As a shortcoming of the Time Use Survey can be regarded the fact that the survey does not include data on the motives of voluntary work, which could be significant when considering the future of voluntary activities. The reduced participation of young people in particular may be a challenge to voluntary work in the future. Based on other studies (Yeung, 2002), we know that by far the most important factor that motivates voluntary work is willingness to help others, and this willingness is shared by young people. However, the participation of young people is characterised by a sporadic nature, short term and unwillingness to commit to voluntary work over a longer period of time. In other words, the participation of young people (or lack of it) is also about the offer of voluntary work: it is blatantly obvious that new operating practices will be needed to involve young people. Online activities are a form of voluntary work that might have a special appeal to young people. In addition, the Internet is able to break the boundaries of place and time. According to Mika Pantzar (2011), the most opportune time for online activities is during the transition periods of the working or studying day; the use of social media peaks at the beginning and end of the working and studying day and during the lunch break. Travel to and from work is also an important time for online communication. Regardless of the fact that work and free time do not seem to have merged to the extent that was previously predicted, for example, in the form of telework, changes have taken place in the proportions of work and free time. Quantitatively, people have more free time, and the subjective importance of free time is continuously increasing (Liikkanen, Hanifi, and Hannula, 2005). Subjective free time has not increased, however, and experiences of rush have remained unchanged; some 40 per cent of the population have experienced a shortage of time ever since the late 1980s (Pääkkönen and Hanifi 2011). People experience rush both during their working time and free time, whereas at least a part of working time can be experienced as time for oneself, or personal time.

Slightly paradoxically, it is the serious free time that emerges as the time that gives us experiences and adds richness to our lives (Panzar, 2011; Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). In the same vein, we could say that working life, too, resembles the definitions of serious free time at its best. Both at work and in free time, motivation stems from a possibility for self-actualisation, for learning and sharing experiences with others (Panzar, 2011). Voluntary work, too, contains all these elements. Perhaps the boundaries of work and free time will in the future become more porous, also as regards voluntary work. According to Pessi (2011), one of the most powerful international trends today is a possibility supported by the employer to engage in voluntary work during working hours, or in educational institutions as part of the curriculum. The majority of British higher education students who had taken part in voluntary activities reported that the activities had increased their belief in their own abilities and their understanding of other people, and more than one half felt that voluntary activities had helped
them in finding a job. It seems that voluntary work could, even more than today, serve as a bridge to paid employment, which could also work in the other direction; the share of fit and healthy pensioners will increase in the future, and according to studies that looked into motives for voluntary work (Pessi and Oravasaari, 2010), many of them would in principle be willing to play a bigger part in voluntary work. Indeed, the Time Use Survey indicates that in the last 10 years pensioners have increased their participation in voluntary activities. Voluntary work could also be a positive alternative that is rewarding in terms of their personal lives for others living through a period of transition, including the unemployed or those on parental leave or in an atypical employment relationship. Up till now, these very groups have been more likely than others to be excluded from voluntary activities. It is obvious, however, that a precondition for involving these groups in voluntary work would be increased cooperation between NGOs and workplaces, and in some cases, also flexibility between NGOs and the social security system.

Time use and changes that take place in it have always also been a question of welfare. Some of our every-day activities are characterised by the fact that in a way, they seem to compete with each other. Other activities, on the other hand, are based on communality, in which a higher number of participants increases both individual welfare and social capital. Voluntary work is an activity that builds on communality and creates communality, the impacts of which extend to society at large. It is clear that social decisions play a role in whether the possibilities for voluntary work, and thus social capital, are increased or undermined.

About the author

Riitta Hanifi works as a researcher at Statistics Finland where she is involved in Leisure and Time Use Surveys. She is interested in issues related to leisure time use and particularly in those concerning civil society. She has studied cultural participation and collective activities, voluntary work, informal help, and trust as part of social capital.

References


