

VOLUNTEERS ENGAGEMENT. A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

A descriptive / comparative research is presented with the aim of knowing engagement levels in university volunteers and associative organizations volunteers' groups. The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale was administered; it measures vigor, absorption and dedication scales and engagement levels. The sample of this research was intentional non-probabilistic, composed of (a) volunteers from the National University of Mar del Plata (UNMDP) participating during the last 4 years in extension and volunteering projects and (b) associative organizations volunteers from Mar del Plata. Basic descriptive were calculated and non-probabilistic statistics were applied to compare volunteering groups. Results show critical differences between sex in dedication and vigor, between training levels in vigor and engagement (total score). No critical levels were found between volunteering type, age and seniority as a volunteer.

KEY WORDS: Engagement; Volunteering; University volunteering; Third sector.



INTRODUCTION

The research, of a descriptive nature, aims to know the levels of engagement in groups of volunteers from the National University of Mar del Plata (hereinafter UNMDP) and volunteers from associative organizations in the same city. Specifically, it seeks to: (a) describe the levels of engagement in both groups of volunteers, (b) compare the levels of vigor, dedication and absorption (engagement scales) in both groups of volunteers and (c) evaluate critical levels of association between engagement and sociodemographic variables (sex, age, level of education/training and seniority as a volunteer).

This research involves the incursion in the study of social competences that are decisive for a world that requires social transformations, values, commitment, tolerance, respect for the other and capacity for selfless and solid delivery.

It is framed from Positive Psychology that places the emphasis on positive factors among which is engagement. This factor, due to its characteristics, is decisive in the framework of volunteer activities, the second major axis of this research, which are defined as not being lucrative and demand a high level of involvement and commitment, becoming increasingly necessary in the framework of a society that presents a high psychosocial risk. There is a shortage of research related to engagement with the activity of volunteering, this type of activity being fundamental in the promotion of a solidary and participatory society.

DEVELOPMENT

Theoretical review

Traditionally, research that has focused on studying the factors that affect occupational health and well-being, have done so from a negative perspective trying to identify diseases, risk factors, epidemiological data, levels of discomfort such as anxiety, work stress, etc. However, in recent years there have been an increase in studies that use a positive approach, trying to identify protective factors of the professional and personal well-being of the worker and explain why there are people and organizations that enjoy more positive energy in relation to work, as well as in the way to achieve it (Díez & Dolan, 2008; Blanch, Sahagún & Cervantes, 2010). Specifically, the latest trends in the study of burnout or chronic work stress have taken a turn towards the study of an opposite factor: engagement. This change is due to a certain boom in Positive Psychology, especially in the last decade, a concept that

focuses not only on the weaknesses and dysfunctions of the human being but on their strengths and their optimal functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; García-Renedo, Llorens, Cifre & Salanova, 2006).

The engagement has been defined as a relatively persistent positive affective state of fullness, which is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption or concentration at work (Salanova, Schaufeli, Llorens, Peiró & Grau, 2000; Manzano, 2002; Schaufeli, Martínez, Marques Pinto, Salanova & Bakker, 2002). The force refers to high energy levels and mental activation at work, the will and willingness to invest efforts and persistence, even in the face of difficulties. The dedication denotes a high labor involvement, together with the manifestation of a high level of meaning attributed to the work. It is associated with enthusiasm, being proud and inspired by work, characterized by a feeling of importance and challenge. The absorption is characterized by a state of concentration, feeling that time passes quickly and one has difficulties to break away from work due to the strong sense of enjoyment, fulfillment and experienced concentration.

Salanova, Schaufeli, Llorens, Peiró and Grau (2000) have found that there would be a tendency for absorption to function independently in relation to the dimensions of vigor and dedication, which is because absorption would be more a consequence of engagement and not so much a dimension of it. In line with this, other authors refer to dedication and vigor as the heart of engagement (Lisbona, Morales & Palací, 2009) in the same way that exhaustion and depersonalization are considered the central core of burnout. Research shows that a negative correlation can be established between the burnout and engagement scales: between exhaustion and vigor and between cynicism (depersonalization) and dedication because they are scales that score inversely (Schaufeli, Martínez, Marques Pinto, Salanova & Bakker, 2002; González-Roma, Schaufeli, Bakker & Lloret, 2006).

Salanova, Schaufeli, Llorens, Peiró and Grau (2000) argue that engagement is a motivational construct, since it has activation, energy, effort and persistence components; otherwise, it is aimed at achieving objectives. People who experience engagement, are energetic and effectively linked to their work activities and feel fully capable of responding to the demands of their job with absolute effectiveness (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Salanova, Agut & Peiró, 2005). The consequences of engagement are the positive attitude towards work and the organization (reflected in job satisfaction, organizational commitment and low intention to leave work), high motivation to learn new things and take on new challenges at work, initiative behaviors personnel, successful performance in tasks, a better quality of customer service and an

increase in employee health, one of the indicators being the decrease in psychosomatic complaints. Another important consequence of engagement refers to the extrapolation of positive emotions from work to home and vice versa, which is reflected in a better reconciliation of family and work life (Salanova, Schaufeli, Llorens, Peiró & Grau, 2000).

The engagement has been studied in relation to sociodemographic variables such as age and sex (Chiang, Núñez, Martín & Salazar, 2010; Benevides-Pereira, Fraiz de Camargo & Porto-Martins, 2011) finding relevant associations, although there would be a tendency to consider that high levels of engagement are more frequent in the male sex and the lower levels, in the female sex.

In the framework of research, engagement, understood as a positive concept, is essential to understand the maintenance of non-remunerative and non-mandatory activities such as volunteering (Clary & Snyder, 1999), being one of the most important factors to have in account in non-profit organizations (Vecina, Chacón, Sueiro & Barrón, 2012).

In relation to volunteering, it can be noted that it has acquired different senses throughout history. The concept of volunteering acquires different forms and meanings depending on the environment, is greatly influenced by the history, politics, religion and culture of a region. Volunteering refers mainly to the character of gratuitousness and freedom with which personal time is offered (Cabezas Gonzales, 2001; Chacón & Vecina, 2002; Spanish Red Cross, 2002; Tapia, 2007; Tapia, 2010), becoming unspecific in terms of characteristics, objectives and modalities of the activity carried out at that time donated free of charge. This determines the diversity of definitions found in the literature. Frequently, the character of solidarity and social commitment of the volunteer is mentioned, as well as its contextualization in non-profit organizations and / or social action programs, maintaining that the volunteer's work comes from a sensitization and awareness process, fully respecting to the individual or individuals to whom he directs his activity and can work in isolation, although he usually acts in a group (Vecina, 2001; Chacón & Vecina, 2002). Gutiérrez Resa (1997) defines volunteering as the voluntary and solidarity benefit of a part of one's time and faculties for the benefit of other citizens who need it, contextualized in social action organizations and programs and without receiving financial compensation.

Following a broad definition, volunteering can be thought of as a continuum in which there is a certain degree of graduation and differences between its most informal and sporadic forms to the most formal and intensive (Tang, McBride & Sherraden, 2003) following a series of criteria such as structure, formality, duration, intensity and

remuneration. The idea of continuum emphasizes the unity of the concept of volunteering, simultaneously establishing the gradation and differences between its different modalities (Davis Smith, 2002).

Associative organizations are a fertile environment for volunteer activity. The last few years have witnessed the interest aroused around the wide range of social institutions that act outside the limits of the market and the State. Despite their diversity, these organizations share some common features such as: being organized, being autonomous, not sharing benefits, volunteering and being private (Roitter, 2001). It can be noted that volunteering is one of the requirements for the formation of this type of organizations (Estébanez, 2005).

Another area that offers the possibility of people approaching to voluntarily carry out a series of activities is the university. According to Hustinx, Vanhove, Declercq, Hermans and Lammertyn (2005), volunteering at the university or university volunteering includes extracurricular-spontaneous activities, not paid, externally oriented, not limited in time or in type of activities, taking place within like out of college. Arias Careaga (2008) argues that the integration of volunteer activities in the university can favor the promotion of values such as solidarity, altruism or tolerance, and constitute an advantage for the student's professional future. The same author points out that what distinguishes university volunteering from other types of volunteering is what emphasizes the subject who performs the action against what or on whom the performance, as is usual in other volunteers. According to the author, there are characteristics that differentiate university volunteering from volunteering in associative organizations, including: the training of professionals for insertion into the workplace, voluntary action as a complement to professional training, volunteering understood as a way of raising awareness and formation of values, which is not born directly from the environment of the associative world and, finally, the dimension, orientation and type of actions implemented.

Regarding the permanence in the volunteer activity, Dávila de León and Chacón Fuertes (2004) found that there is a significant direct and negative relationship between the motivation to improve the curriculum and the real time of permanence. The authors hypothesize that people who have satisfied their need to gain professional experience or have obtained paid work leave the organization. On the other hand, Vecina, Chacon and Sueiro (2010) argue that permanent volunteers have higher levels of emotional fatigue, organizational commitment and role identity as volunteers. They also seem to be more satisfied with the friendly relationships in the organization and have a greater intention of staying long term (two years). Vecina, Chacón, Sueiro and Barrón (2012)

affirm that engagement is a crucial variable to explain volunteer satisfaction, as a variable that explains the intention to remain in the activity.

Methodology

It is a descriptive/comparative investigation. The engagement levels of two groups of volunteers were analyzed: university volunteers and associative organizations from the city of Mar del Plata.

The sample of this research is intentional, not probabilistic, composed of volunteers from the National University of Mar del Plata (hereinafter UNMDP) who have participated in the last 4 years in university volunteer projects or extension project (N= 31) and volunteers from associative organizations in the city of Mar del Plata (N= 56). We worked with a sample of volunteers belonging to 15 different organizations, which were classified as follows: (a) Social-community assistance (n= 6), whose objective is social-health, legal assistance to the population in situation homelessness/high risk (wandering, homeless, needy families, children with chronic diseases, former inmates); (b) Art, culture, leisure and sport (n= 3), whose objective is to promote and disseminate cultural and sports activities; (c) Law, political-legal advice (n= 2), whose objective is the grouping of immigrants and promotion of their rights; (d) Development (n= 2) whose objective is the physical, intellectual, social development of children and youth; (e) Habitat, housing and environment (n= 2), whose objectives are the promotion of the struggle for access to land, housing and habitat, protection, assistance, recovery and adoption of animals in distress , injured and/or mistreated, as well as the dissemination and awareness of these situations.

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-17) of Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá and Bakker (2001) was administered. This is a self-applied questionnaire that includes three dimensions or constitutive components of engagement: vigor, dedication, absorption. The UWES-17 can be used either as a unifactorial instrument (which allows obtaining a single total engagement score at work) or trifactorial (which allows obtaining, in addition to the total score, a score for each of its dimensions) depending on the interests of the researcher. The instrument has the following psychometric qualities: (a) internal consistency : it is high (.93 Cronbach's), (b) internal correlation : the three dimensions of UWES-17 are closely related (exceed .65 Cronbach's α), (c) stability: UWES-17 scores are relatively stable over time (average of two years for the co-efficient of force , dedication and absorption) (Benevides-Pereira, Fraiz Camargo & Porto-Martins, 2011).

The UWES-17 instrument was administered to those volunteers who gave informed consent regarding their participation in the investigation. Data were loaded into matrices using the SPSS program (15.0). Subsequently, the analysis of basic descriptions and the calculation of non-parametric statistics were carried out to compare independent groups according to the sociodemographic variables (Mann-Whitney test and Kruskal-Wallis test).

The results are then offered, first for the engagement considered globally (total score) and then in relation to each of the dimensions that compose it. Then cases are distributed according to sociodemographic variables and engagement levels. Finally, non-parametric tests are applied to detect critical levels of association.

Engagement levels in both groups of volunteers

In both groups of volunteers, 50% or more have high levels of engagement. In turn, the group of university volunteers accumulates more than 40% in the average levels of engagement. The low and very high levels are present in both groups but with percentages below 10% in associative organization volunteers and with percentages below 5% in university volunteers.

Percentages close to 50% are accumulated by volunteers with average levels of absorption in both groups. They are followed by high levels of absorption that accumulate about 35% of volunteers in both groups. In university volunteers no extreme cases were found with very high or very low levels on this scale.

In relation to the levels of dedication, the highest percentages accumulate in the medium, high and very high levels for both groups. Volunteers from associative organizations accumulate more than 30% of their volunteers at the very high levels of dedication and university volunteers accumulate more than 40% at the high levels of the same dimension. As for the low level of dedication, there are few volunteers who position themselves at this level. In both groups of volunteers there are no cases with very low levels on this scale.

Regarding vigor levels, the medium level accumulates more than 45% of university volunteers, the same happens with the high level in the same group. More than 35% of the volunteers of associative organizations are distributed in high levels of vigor and more than 25% of them are accumulated in the very high levels of this dimension.

Engagement and sociodemographic variables

Below are associations between levels of engagement (total score) and sociodemographic variables (sex, age, level of education/training, seniority as a volunteer).

Regarding sex, both female and male volunteers are distributed mostly in the medium and high levels of engagement. However, the male sex has more cases at very high levels of engagement in relation to the female sex. On the contrary, the low level of engagement is observed only in female volunteers (see Figure 1).

It can be seen that in all age ranges and in both groups, volunteers focus on the medium and high levels of engagement (see Figure 2).

Figure 3 shows that in all levels of education/training the high level of engagement predominates, with the exception of the subjects who have incomplete university in which, although the high level is high, the medium level of engagement predominates. The complete university and incomplete university levels present only one case at a very high level of engagement and, in turn, are the only ones where low level cases occur. On the other hand, there are 4 and 3 cases of complete tertiary that are located in high and very high level of engagement respectively. Cases with a complete primary level, although scarce, were distributed entirely in high levels of engagement.

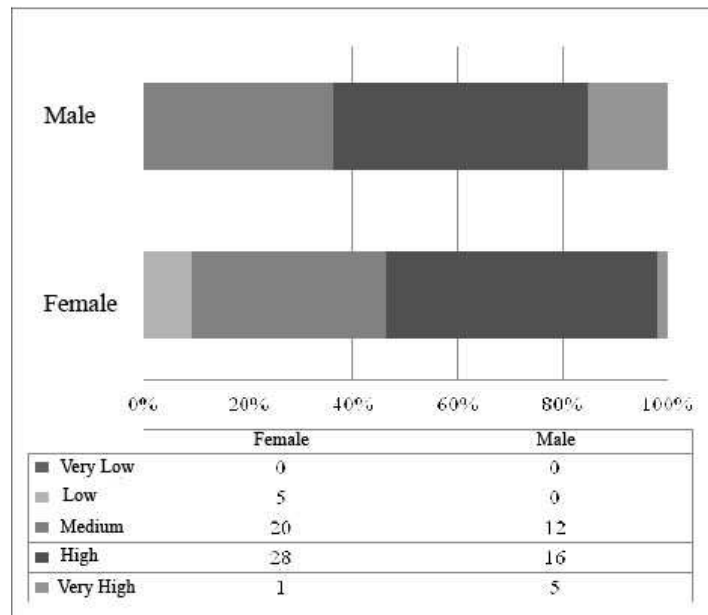


Figure N°1. Distribution of volunteers according to level of engagement and sex
Source: Own Elaboration

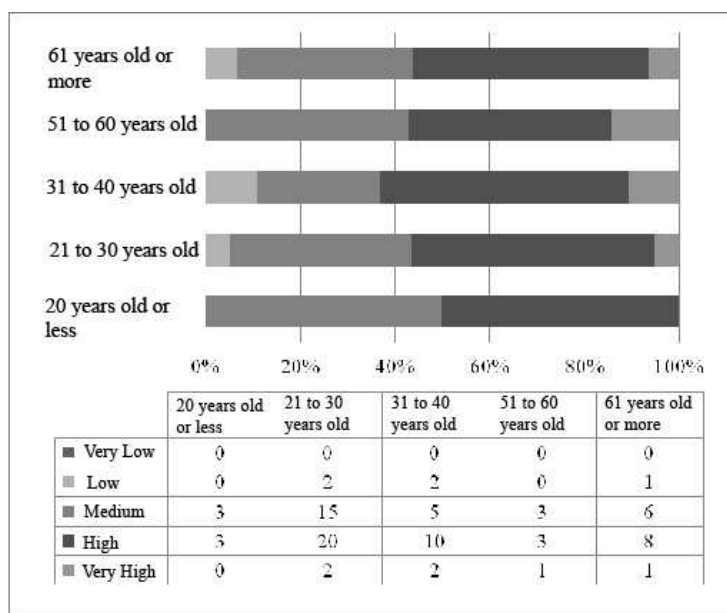


Figure N°2. Distribution of volunteers from both groups according to level of engagement and age
Source: Own Elaboration

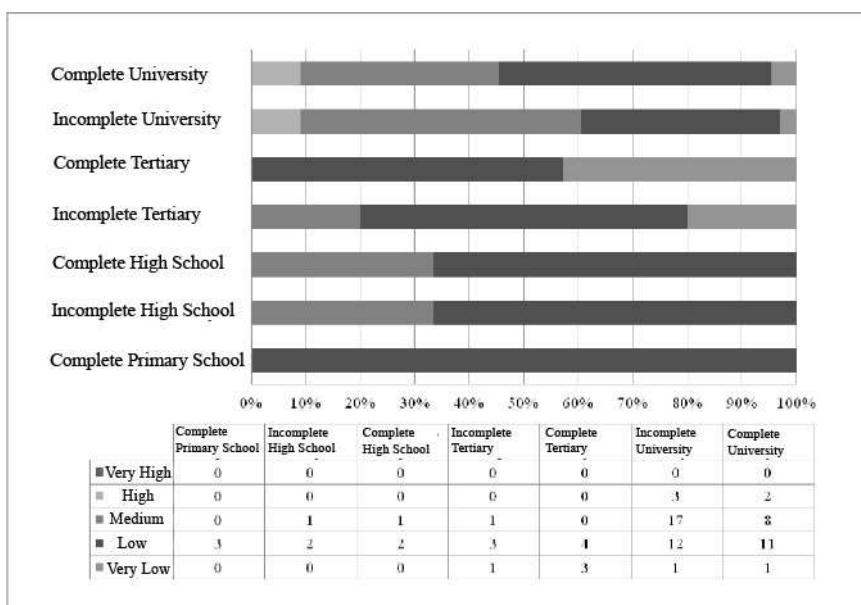


Figure N°3. Distribution of volunteers according to level of engagement and level of instruction / training
Source: Own Elaboration

In relation to seniority as a volunteer, volunteers with less than 1 year old are distributed between the medium and high levels in a balanced way. Volunteers with an age of more than 1 year and up to three years, present twice as many cases in high levels compared to medium levels. The same happens in volunteers with up to 5 years of age where the high levels double the means, although in this group there are fewer

cases that make up the sample. With more than 5 years old, 3 cases are distributed in each of the mentioned levels (See Figure 4).

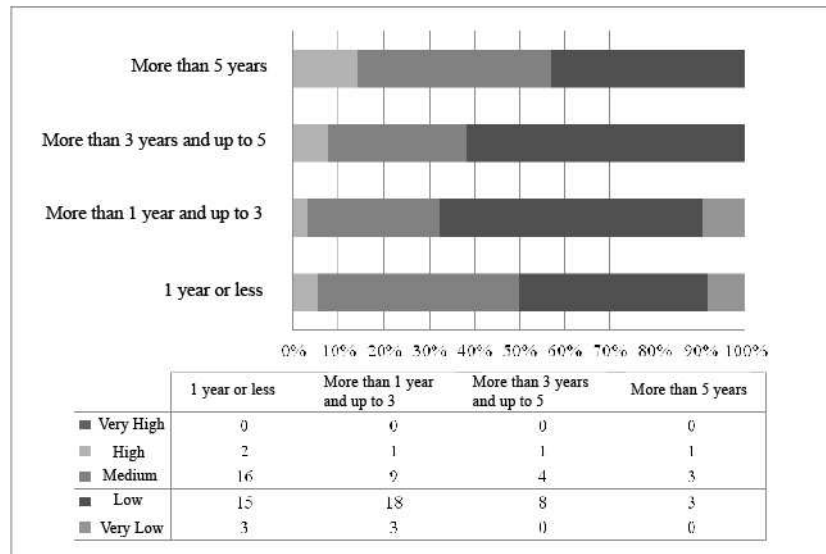


Figure N°4. Distribution of volunteers according to level of engagement and seniority in the project/organization
Source: Own Elaboration

Non-parametric analysis

To detect critical levels of association between sociodemographic variables and engagement scales, the Mann-Whitney U tests were applied for two independent samples and the Kruskal-Wallis test for several independent samples.

Table 1 contrasts groups of volunteers according to sex by applying the Mann-Whitney U test. Critical differences were found in the dimensions of engagement, dedication and vigor. Table 2 shows the contrast of groups according to age ranges by means of the Kruskal-Wallis test.

Table N°1. Contrast statistics according to the sex of the volunteers

Contrast Statistics	Absorption	Dedication	Vigor	Engagement
U from Mann-Whitney	753,000	666,500	645,500	710,500
Wilcoxon W	2238,000	2151,500	2130,500	2195,500
Z	-1,320	-2,067	-2,274	-1,743
Sig. Asymptotic. (bilateral)	, 187	, 039	, 023	, 081

Note. Group variable: Sex. Mann-Whitney U test.
Source: Own Elaboration

Table N°2. Contrast statistics according to the age of the volunteers

Contrast Statistics	Absorption	Dedication	Vigor	Engagement
Chi squared	1,803	4,719	1,872	, 473
gl	4	4	4	4
Sig. Asymptotic.	, 772	, 317	, 759	, 976

Note. Group variable: Age. Kruskal-Wallis test.

Source: Own Elaboration

Table N°3. Contrast statistics according to the level of instruction/training of the volunteers

Contrast Statistics	Absorption	Dedication	Vigor	Engagement
Chi squared	12,537	10,027	23,849	17,033
gl	6	6	6	6
Sig. Asymptotic.	, 051	, 124	, 001	, 009

Note. Group variable: Level of instruction / training. Kruskal-Wallis test.

Source: Own Elaboration

The same test was applied to contrast groups of volunteers according to level of instruction/training, finding critical levels in the vigor dimension and in the total engagement score (Table 3). To detect between which levels of instruction the significant values are found, a two-to-two comparison was made by applying the Mann-Whitney U test (Table 4). According to Table 4, significant values were found among several of the instruction training levels compared two to two. The vigor dimension is the one that is evidenced as more critical since it shows critical values in almost all of the groups compared. Then follow the total engagement score especially when comparing university groups (incomplete/complete).

Table N°4. Contrast statistics according to the level of instruction/training of the volunteers

Levels of instruction / training compared	Vigor	Engagement
Primary complete and secondary incomplete	,036	,232
Complete primary and incomplete university	,015	,072
Complete primary and complete university	,047	,205
Incomplete secondary and complete secondary	,036	,939
Incomplete high school and incomplete university	,015	,375
Incomplete high school and full university	,047	,711
Full secondary and full tertiary	,003	,007
Tertiary incomplete and university incomplete	,048	,062
Full tertiary and incomplete university	,000	,001
Full tertiary and full university	,003	,006

Note. Only the comparisons between levels of instruction / training that have presented at least one critical value in the vigor and engagement dimension (total score) are shown in the table.

Source: Own Elaboration

Next, the Kruskal-Wallis test was applied to contrast volunteers according to their age as such, not finding critical levels (Table 5).

Table N°5. Contrast statistics according to seniority as a volunteer

Contrast Statistics	Absorption	Dedication	Vigor	Engagement
Chi squared	1,373	, 081	5,951	2,986
gl	3	3	3	3
Sig. Asymptotic.	, 712	, 994	, 114	, 394

Note. Group variable: Age in the organization. Kruskal-Wallis test.

Source: Own Elaboration

Finally, contrast statistics (Mann-Whitney U) were calculated according to the type of volunteering (university volunteering and voluntary organizations), finding that there would be no critical levels in the samples considered (Table 6).

Table N°6. Contrast statistics according to type of volunteering

Contrast Statistics	Absorption	Dedication	Vigor	Engagement
U from Mann-Whitney	759,500	847,500	714,500	823,000
Wilcoxon W	1255,500	1343,500	1210,500	1319,000
Z	-1,051	-, 191	-1,441	-, 440
Sig. Asymptotic. (bilateral)	, 293	, 848	, 150	, 660

Note. Group variable: Type of volunteering. Mann-Whitney U test.

Source: Own Elaboration

CONCLUSION

The analyzed results allow us to observe that both types of volunteering behave similarly in terms of engagement level (total score) since both groups concentrate 90% of volunteers in medium and high engagement levels. The results of the analysis by engagement dimension (absorption, vigor and dedication) are discussed below.

Absorption, as noted at the beginning, indicates concentration, sense of enjoyment, fulfillment and difficulties in getting rid of work. These characteristics occur, in the majority of volunteers, at the medium and high levels, with the medium level being considerably higher in relation to the high level. The levels are distributed similarly to both volunteer groups. Regarding the dimension of dedication (concentration and involvement in the work), both types of volunteering qualify with the

two upper levels high and very high. The vigor that indicates activation, effort and persistence is higher in volunteers of associative organizations than among university volunteers.

The low and very low levels have reduced presence for each of the dimensions. This would suggest that volunteer activity is associated with medium or higher levels of engagement in all its dimensions.

The calculated contrast statistics (Mann-Whitney U test) show that there would be no significant differences comparing both groups by engagement dimension.

Specifically, the non-parametric analysis of engagement and its dimensions in relation to different sociodemographic variables allows us to say that:

- (a) In relation to sex there would be significant differences in the dimension of dedication and vigor, these results contrast with those other investigations that did not find such differences by sex (Chiang, Núñez, Martín and Salazar, 2010). Although there are few cases considered, the highest levels of engagement (total score) were mostly found in male volunteers and in the lowest levels of engagement were found only in female volunteers. This result also supports the findings of Benevides-Pereira, Fraiz de Camargo and Porto-Martins (2011).
- (b) In all age ranges considered, engagement is distributed in a similar manner, with the medium and high levels prevailing. When grouped by the age variable, there are no differential levels of engagement (neither by total score nor by dimensions). We agree on this point with the results of Benevides-Pereira, Fraiz de Camargo and Porto-Martins (2011) and Chiang, Núñez, Martín and Salazar (2010). In any case, it is worth mentioning that the subsamples included in each age range are very small and that future studies could contrast these results by expanding them.
- (c) Regarding the levels of instruction/training, critical differences were found in the vigor and engagement dimension (total score). Critical differences appear above all when comparing tertiary education/training levels with university students, whether complete or incomplete. It is considered desirable to increase the number of participants in future research to test the hypothesis that links engagement at the instruction/training level.
- (d) Analyzing seniority as a volunteer, no significant levels were found that differentiate groups by seniority.
- (e) Finally, no critical levels were found comparing groups by type of volunteering (university / associative organizations).

Considering the first particular objective: to describe the levels of engagement in both groups of volunteers, the research has shown that there are no significant differences in the levels of engagement (total score) or in the dimensions of absorption, vigor and dedication between university volunteer groups and volunteer of associative organizations. The vast majority of volunteers who participated in this study have presented medium and high levels of engagement (total score).

Significant differences were found when contrasting groups according to sex in the dimensions of dedication and vigor. This means that there would be differences between male volunteers and female volunteers in terms of levels of enthusiasm and involvement in the work and levels of activation, effort and persistence. Regarding the level of instruction/training of the volunteers, critical levels were found in the vigor and engagement dimension (total score).

No critical levels were found in groups according to age or seniority in volunteer activity.

It is worth mentioning a series of limitations present in the study. In the first instance the number of participants being that we worked with an intentional sample. This study constitutes a first approach to the subject, since the research group will continue working with volunteers of different institutional belonging in the framework of the current social problems of our country that primarily require attitudes of responsibility and social commitment. Another limitation lies in the data collection instrument, the UWES-17 has been applied in a self-administered manner, future research should consider triangulating results of the UWES-17 with others obtained through more qualitative methodologies.

This research has a direct impact on the decision-making processes in relation to the formulation of selection criteria in volunteer calls (both university and in Third Sector organizations), thus considering profiles of volunteers engaged in selecting the teams of job. In relation to this, in this investigation no critical differences were found by age groups or by seniority as a volunteer, which could impact when mitigating restrictions by age or previous experience that are sometimes sustained in volunteer calls. Some critical differences were found by sex and by level of instruction/training although they should be contrasted in larger samples.

On the other hand, the results of this research also have an impact on the design of training and development processes for volunteers that can be oriented towards strengthening psychosocial competences linked to the three-dimensionality of engagement.

In summary, this research shows the high importance of the variable engagement and its dimensions (vigor, dedication and absorption) for volunteer work both in non-governmental organizations and in university projects. No previous research has been found that studies this variable and its dimensions in volunteer contexts. From a socially committed university, it is important to promote a volunteer that strengthens psychosocial competencies to address current problems and to promote a solidarity, participatory and committed society.

REFERENCES

Please refer to articles in Spanish Bibliography.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ABSTRACT

Please refer to articles Spanish Biographical abstract.