Post Earthquake Volunteer Learning That Build Up Caring Learning Communities

Naoki Okamura

Abstract—From a perspective of moral education, this study has examined the experiences of a group of college students who volunteered in disaster areas after the magnitude 9.0 Earthquake, which struck the Northeastern region of Japan in March, 2011. The research, utilizing the method of grounded theory, has uncovered that most of the students have gone through positive changes in their development of moral and social characters, such as attaining deeper sense of empathy and caring personalities. The study expresses, in identifying the nature of those transformations, that the importance of volunteer work should strongly be recognized by the colleges and universities in Japan, in fulfilling their public responsibility of creating and building learning communities that are responsible and caring.

Keywords—Moral development, moral education, service learning, volunteer learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

ON March 11, 2011, magnitude 9.0 earthquake had struck the Tohoku (north-eastern) region of Japan. A series of tsunami and the nuclear accident that followed caused colossal damage to the coastal regions of Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima prefectures. During the first five month after the quake, Japan National Council of Social Welfare reported that the cumulative total number of people who have registered to be volunteer workers were close to 700,000. This shows that the recovery efforts were widely supported by the citizen volunteers. From the beginning, many private colleges and universities in Japan were also very active in promoting their students to go to the devastated Tohoku regents as volunteers. The focus of study is to record and analyze the experiences of students who volunteered in disaster stricken areas of Tohoku and see how it has affected them from standpoints of social and ethical studies. There are three specific objectives set for this study.

(1) This study aims to collect and document stories told by student volunteers, in order to preserve them as a part of important record of the earthquake.

(2) This study will attempt to analyze internal changes that may have occurred in volunteer students using various perspectives including that of sociology of educational studies and developmental psychology.

(3) This study will examine the significance of volunteer work for universities and colleges in Japan in terms of socio-ethical education.

Naoki Okamura is with the Tokyo Christian University Graduate School, Chiba, Japan (e-mail: okamura@tci.ac.jp).

II. RESEARCH METHOD AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This study utilized the research guidelines of 'grounded theory' laid out by Michel Quinn Patton in his work *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* [1]. Twenty-three students from Tokyo Christian University have volunteered themselves to participate in the initial phase of this study. They were asked to write brief descriptions of their volunteer work as well as their background. Based on this pilot study, nine students (six women and three men) were chosen for this research, using Michael Quinn Patton's 'homogeneous sampling' guideline [2]. The following are the perimeters of sampling used in this study.

(1) The students have never participated in disaster relief volunteer work before.

(2) Their volunteer work took place ether in Iwate, Miyagi, or in Fukushima prefectures.

(3) They all have seen the devastations of the quake first hand and also had contacts with the earthquake/tsunami victims and survivors.

(4) At least one month have passed after the volunteer work.

Among the students who participated in the pilot study, there were those who worked as volunteers for the Kobe quake of 1995. The sampling perimeter (1) was set to exclude such students, since this study did not focus on comparing experiences of the two earthquakes. The perimeters (2), (3) were set to make sure that the participants have had similar experiences, in spite of visiting different disaster stricken areas with different volunteer organizations. The perimeter (4) was set to make sure that the participants had some time, after returning from the field, to reflect upon their experiences.

Interviews were conducted on nine willing participants who agreed to be interviewed. A variety of qualitative data, focused on their volunteer experiences, were gathered from interviews and from free group discussions. The types of volunteer work that they were involved varied from food distribution, sorting relief supplies, removing mud from individual homes to babysitting and helping children in their schoolwork. They were required to sit through approximately one and a half hour of in-depth interviews [3].After the individual interviews, they were gathered in groups to speak and discuss freely among themselves. The following four standardized simple open-ended interview questions were used to encourage sharing their stories candidly and honestly: (1)What motivated you to participate in the volunteer work? (2) What were your thoughts and feelings, while you were in Tohoku? (3) Have you seen any change within yourselves that might have occurred as a result of your volunteer work? (4) Have you had some opportunities to deeply reflect with others upon what you have experienced?

III. Results of Interviews and Discussions

With the consent of participants, interviews and discussions were recorded using a digital recording device. Verbal data were written out, coded and were categorized using the grounded theory guidelines of Patton. Non-verbal data, such as facial expressions and tone of voice were also noted and used also as a part of data. Then the findings were divided into the following six sections. Some of the recorded answers that may support the findings are translated and included in each section.

The interview question (1) revealed what motivated the students to go out and take part in the earthquake volunteer work. Some were motivated by their own interest and determination to go and do something for the people of Tohoku. Others were motivated by their desires to see what was happening in disaster stricken areas and to find out for themselves. Many wanted to see and feel the devastation, not so much to fulfill their selfish curiosity, but to become effective volunteers in helping the victims.

"I went because my friend told me to do something and not just feel sorry for those who were devastated."

"I was thinking very hard, what could I do?"

"I wanted to experience what the people of Tohoku were experiencing."

"I wanted to see the devastation with my own eyes."

"My family did not want me to go, but I decided to go without their permission."

What confronted the students in the field of volunteer work were the sights of incredible devastation. Even after some months have passed since their return, many were still having difficult time describing what they saw and experienced.

"I saw the devastation, for the first time, from inside the van. I thought I was hallucinating. However, after getting out, I smelled the stench of dead fish, and then I realized, it was for real."

"I absolutely was without words. It was a bizarre sight."

"I could not believe this calm ocean could cause such a devastation."

"I had very hard time making sense of what I was seeing."

When the students tried to portray what they saw in Tohoku, many struggled to find appropriate words. In a similar way, with frowning faces, they also struggled to describe their role as volunteer workers in the field. It seems that many were forced to re-examine their own abilities as well as their self-identities.

"I thought I will start the volunteer work right way, as soon as I arrive at the site. However, I literally could not move my body, because I was so shocked."

"Since the devastation was so over whelming, I thought, my small help is probably meaningless."

"I hoped to do something. I found out I can do nothing."

"I realized my foolishness and thoughtlessness for thinking that I can make a difference."

"I definitely was an outsider looking into the disaster from a safe distance. I felt so sorry for the victims for my presence."

"What I learned from my volunteer work was my powerlessness."

"I realized, compared to the suffering of the people in Tohoku, my complaints and discontents that I had back in Tokyo were so insignificant."

Most answers to the question (3), asking about any changes that may have occurred in them-selves after coming back from the field, also included the tone of regret. Many students seem to notice that their strong feelings toward the victims were starting to fade away and stated that it was discouraging. Many recognized it as their weakness, and used a word 'regretful' to describe their feelings.

"My memories of Tohoku are starting to fade, even though it only has been two month after I got back, and even though there are so many people still suffering there."

"My prayers for Tohoku are becoming more routine and sometimes I even forget to pray. I regret letting myself be like that."

"My feelings and concerns for Tohoku are getting weaker and lesser. I really am a selfish person, I think."

However, answers to the question (3) also included some positive changes in students. Many described it as changes in how they look at the world with different perspectives than before.

"Before going to Tohoku, I took things, like having water and electricity, for granted. Since I got back, I also realize that those man-made things, like the skyscrapers in Tokyo, are actually very fragile."

"One day during my volunteer work, I was told to stay at our base camp and clean up the facility for the other volunteer workers. At first, I wished to go out to the field and work among victims. But then, I realized that someone has to stay back and take care the base camp, and that sort of work is equally important. To this day, I feel that I have learned a very important lesson."

"After my Tohoku experience, I realized that there are other types of sufferings that exist also in different parts of the world which demand my attention."

"Saving energy became my passion in my home, after I got back from Tohoku. Family members told me that it does not make much difference, since our area was unaffected by the earthquake. I surprised myself by standing up and giving them a passionate lecture about the importance of small efforts that make a big difference in this country."

"So many people lost their lives through this earthquake. I realized also that more people lose their lives by committing suicide every year in Japan. I definitely need to pay more attention to my surroundings."

Answers to the question (4), asking about having reflective opportunities after their return, also came back very uniformly. No one claimed to have had much interaction with others about their experiences. Many told that the interviews for this study were their very first opportunity to deeply reflect about their experiences. Many also commented that it was very meaningful for them in discovering the changes in themselves.

"The interview brought out many feelings to the surface."

"As I contemplated on my answers and speaking them out loud, many things became clear."

"I realized that although the experiences of volunteer work may be very similar with others, what we receive and learn from our volunteer work vary a great deal from person to person."

IV. ANALYSIS

In analyzing the above results, this research employed the notion of triangulation in order to facilitate accurate and reliable examinations [4].Interview answers were categorized into four different aspects and were contrasted and weighted against existing findings from the perspectives of sociology, psychology, and moral education.

A. Motivations to Participate in Volunteer Work

David Gerald and Louis A. Penner, who studied motivational factors to participate in volunteer work from socio-psychological point of view, recognized that there are four major models (or factors) that exist [5].

(1) role identity model: individuals effected by their belonging community, which identifies itself strongly with doing volunteer work
(2) values and attitudes model: individuals feel strongly toward the callings of public service
(3) volunteer motivations model: individuals consider volunteer work as a useful tool to improve his or her skills and knowledge
(4) volunteer personality model: individuals simply desire to hold others in need

Gerald and Penner are not asserting that a volunteer worker must adhere to only one of these four models, since it is entirely possible that two or more factors in these models may motivate a person to participate in volunteer work. They, however, stress that the only one of the above four factors usually do take the leading role.

As it was revealed by the interview answers, many participants of this study stated that they, almost instinctively, wanted to do something for the victims and wanted to feel the pain that they are feeling. This seems to suggest that the motivational factor for this group may most likely fall into the model (4) of the four factors [6]. Unfortunately with the collected data alone, we are unable to discover why the students in this study fell into this model to begin with. Nevertheless, it is beneficial to notice, for the purpose of analysis, how they were motivated to go to Tohoku.

B. Crisis Experience

Many participants used words such as 'bizarre sight,' 'beyond description,' and 'realm of imagination' to describe what they saw in Tohoku. They also viewed their volunteer work as very challenging and difficult. What impacts would these serious encounters may have brought to those who experienced it?

Lewis R. Ranbo and Charles E. Farhadian, who specialize in religious conversion theory, explain crisis as, "disordering and disputing experiences that call into question a person's or group's taken for granted world." [7] By religious conversion, they are not merely giving the details of the process in which a person or persons converting into a particular religious faith. As

scholars in the field of psychology and sociology of religion, they emphasize changes in one's worldview and/or value system as important factors. Rambo states, "On a personal level, a crisis may be triggered by people or events. Much of the human science literature has emphasized social disintegration, political oppression, or something very dynamic as instigating crisis." [8] According to Rambo, some react passively towards the crisis and resulting in little or no impact in one's belief system. Others try to position one-self going face to face with crisis and such attitude produces considerable modification in one's worldview and/or value system.

How did the crisis experiences of the students in this study influence their sense of morality? Many realized for the first time, that the reality of human sufferings in this world are very real and are very difficult to accept. Many others also stated that they were 'condescending' and 'arrogant' before visiting Tohoku and showed the attitudes of remorse for what they were thinking and feeling before.

C. Developmental Changes

Constructing a theory of development upon the works of Lawrence Kohlberg and Erick Erickson, James W. Fowler established what he called the 'faith development theory' in 1970's [9]. Fowler, a scholar in the fields of religion and psychology, considered individual's faith as a universal quality or disposition, which develops in six life stages. (He uses the term 'faith' in a similar way that the terms 'spirituality' or 'morality' are often used.) The most unique contribution of Fowler may be that he welcomed the concept of psychological development into the realm of morality and religion and at the same time, he took the concept of faith out of closed systems of specific religions.

According to Fowler, people in the third stage shape their faith relying upon important others. People who move up to the fourth stage depart from strong influences of others and seek to form her or his own faith independently. This development commonly takes place in high school and/or college age people. Quiet self-reflections may trigger the development in some people. However, according to Fowler, it often requires going through some earth shaking experiences, which challenge her or his worldview and/or belief system in significant ways [10].

All the students in this study witnessed the overwhelming despair of others during their volunteer work. Many, as result of their experiences, expressed the need to move away from their unexamined and taken for granted view of the world and move toward becoming more unselfish and caring individuals. Although the results of this study alone may not firmly establish the link between moral developments of the students and their volunteer experiences, the changes that have been observed seem to affirm Fowler's views.

D. Effects of Interviews

The grounded theory method used in this study is designed to start the investigation with describing and unfolding the lived experiences of the students. This approach was originated by a German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and was called the method of phenomenology. When used in the context

of education, it encourages students to actively involve her or him-self in the learning process by bringing their own stories to the table. And through interactions with others, they put together their own conclusions for themselves.

Throughout the course of this study, the researcher's opinions were never expressed to students. All the discoveries and learned lessons came as results of their own experiences through their own reflections. As mentioned before, many students viewed the interviews and discussions as positive opportunities. Comments made by them also confirm that after coming back from Tohoku, it was very important to have reflective opportunities with others who underwent similar experiences. It seems that these opportunities (interviews and group discussions) were essential in maximizing the learning effectiveness of their volunteer experiences.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, first of all, it is essential to appreciate the communities that welcomed the students as volunteers, for they were the ones who provided enriching and inspiring experiences for many of them. Some studies show that volunteer work contributes to decreased psychological distress and buffers the negative consequences of stressors [11]. It increases life satisfaction and decreases depression [12]. It has also been claimed that volunteer activities bring feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment and have positive effects on creating strong and positive self-identity [13]. It is important, therefore, the opportunities of volunteer work in different communities not be taken for granted. And students as well as educators should be very respectful of the need of the people who welcome them in their difficulties.

Secondly, as it has been argued that this study may have uncovered that a group of students, who spent time in earthquake ravaged Tohoku, have gone through positive changes in their development of moral and social characters. It is not to say that they have newly acquired the sense of caring for the earthquake victims through the volunteer work. Some went to the field because she or he already possessed passion for the needy to begin with. However it may be reasonable to assume, through their own admissions, that they became more caring individuals. Observing the nature of those transformations, the importance of volunteer work of all types, especially ones that may question and challenge students' worldviews, should be recognized by many colleges and universities in Japan, in fulfilling their public responsibility of educating their students to become responsible and caring citizens in their communities. And in doing so, teachers must keep in mind that it is also very important to provide students with ample opportunities to reflect and reexamine upon their own experiences for themselves.

Lastly, among many volunteer opportunities for college and university students that are available in Japan, earthquake related volunteer work should obviously be realized as very unique. Therefore, one must be very careful in making comparisons with other types of volunteer work. This research, in utilizing the method of grounded theory, was also built upon the data collected from only nine students and it merely grasped

a tiny portion of their vast and rich experiences from the field of their volunteer work. The results of this study, therefore, should not be considered as definitive conclusions, but as one of many possible explanations, which may guide a person to attain a better understanding of the phenomenon.

REFERENCES

[1] Michel Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Thousand Oaks, California, Sage Publications, Inc., 2002, pp.124-127.
[2] Patton. p.235.
[3] Ibid., p.342.
[4] Ibid., pp.555–566.
[5] David Gerard, "What Makes a Volunteer?" New Society 8, 1985, pp. 236–38., Penner, Louis A. and Marcia A. Finkelstein. "Dispositional and Structural Determinants of Volunteerism." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 74-2, 1998, p.525–37.
[6] Thoits, Peggy A. and Hewitt, Lyndi N., "Volunteer Work and Well-Being" Journal of Health and Social Behavior. vol. 42, June, 2001, pp.115–31.
[7] Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, "Converting: Stages of Religious Change," in Religious Conversion, Christopher Lamb & M. Darrol Bryant, Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies, London, Cassell, 1999, p.25.
[8] Ibid., p.26.
[9] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981.
[10] Ibid.
[11] John Rietschlin, "Voluntary Association Membership and Psychological Distress." Journal of Health and Social Behavior 39, 1998, pp. 348–55.
[12] Van Willigen, Marieke. 1998. "Doing Good, Feeling Better: The Effect of Voluntary Association Membership on Individual Well-Being." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, August, San Francisco, CA.
[13] Thoits, Peggy A. and Hewitt, Lyndi N., "Volunteer Work and Well-Being" Journal of Health and Social Behavior. vol 42, June, 2001, p.118.