

YESTERDAY'S ACTIVISTS, TODAY'S ACTIVISTS? ORGANIZATIONAL CAREER AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN PRESENT DAY ORADEA

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The article investigates the relationship between the organizational careers of residents of condominiums from Oradea – holding leadership positions before or/and after 1990, belonging to the regime's organizations and their present day social activism. Data from a random sample of 300 shows that a rich organizational biography correlates with high level of community involvement. The results are discussed from a theoretical point of view and considering their consequences for politics of community development.

Introduction

The studies on identification of characteristics associated to participatory behavior, political entrepreneurship (Frohlich, Oppenheimer, & Young, 1971) or leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 1997) are marked by several ambiguities, methodological shortcomings or unanswered questions. In Romania such questions are even more sensitive as the issue of participation has to be balanced with ethical problems as belonging to leading structures of the former regime or the moral nature of the qualities which defines a person as being active. This paper is trying to contribute to the explanations of the relationship between social activism of oradean adults and their functional positions through their biographies. With this aim we will investigate the relationship between community participation and the fact that they held leading positions before and after 1990, using survey data from 2007 conducted with 305 people.

Theoretical considerations

To start our analysis we need to review several theoretical standpoints regarding the relationship between social activism and functional and associative career.

A first relevant perspective to explain social activism is the one that attributes it to a psychological predisposition, talent or tendency. According to this theory, an active person is born with this predisposition, or at least activism is the result of deep socializing mechanisms, which occurred most probably during childhood and are hard to be controlled. Brady, Verba and Scholzman (1995) use these mechanisms to explain political participation rates, and support for this theory can be found also for Romanian studies (Dodescu, Hatos, Chioncel, Săveanu, & Titieni, 2004; Hatos, 2006).

In political studies in the 70's and the 80's there was a popular approach to explain participation through the additional resources derived by a higher status. The lack of specification of causal mechanism which link socio – economical status with participation, besides the direct effect of money and time, was later completed by Brady, Verba and Scholzman (1995) who introduced the concept of civic competencies defined as “communication and management skills essential for political action” (p. 272), but which can be defined also as general competencies acquired during ones life which can be transmitted to other fields. There are several factors which explain the different investments of people with civic abilities. One is formal education which determines involvement in two ways: the better educated are more capable to understand their environment, to communicate and organize themselves, and also have more central positions in the social networks. More, work, voluntary associations and churches are institutional frames in which one can acquire civic competencies. In the field of social movements there have been gathered important data supporting the idea of a previous activism which raises the probability of a future activism. Even if the know-how obtained through direct participation can explain involvement, other intermediary factors were also investigated (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1988) (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1988). For example, during participation in different voluntary associations one can develop an activist identity together with to correspondent role sets and searches to act accordingly. The longest to activism history, the more important is the role of activist in ones identity (Becker, 1963).

In light of these findings, a question less studied in Romania is the impact of previous involvement in voluntary associations on present activism, with an obvious reason: the short democratic history can not justify a significant history of association membership - as the communist organizations can not be considered voluntary so their impact on civic competencies and abilities is limited. In a recent article Marc Morje Howard (2003) proved the somewhat counter-intuitive correlation between the lack of activism in the communist period and the skepticism for involvement after communism in Eastern Germany and Russia. The reciprocal is also true: referring to members of communist parties from the former socialist republics from the East of the Iron Curtain Bahry and Silver (1990) noticed that these match, from several points of view, with the typical image of the western activist. Nevertheless, the impact of membership and activism in general voluntary organizations as the Communist Youth Union and the Communist Party are under-investigated. For most of Romanian adults aged above 35, these organizations were the only ones in which they could behave as activists. Did these organizations promote the acquisition of civic competencies and abilities which sustain future activism? Did they develop activist identities, people which always get involved in social dilemmas, which still act and motivate others? Or, on the contrary, consequent to the negative learning will consider the idea of voluntary actions as old-fashioned and illegitimate.

Synthesizing these three perspectives the obvious empirical hypothesis is that there should be a positive relation between current activism and the positions held by a person in the past. Either that the past positions are merely a reword and a clue for a predisposition for activism, either that because the person acquired through these positions different civic competencies, we expect that between previous positions held and current civic involvement to have a significant relation.

Data

The data presented in this section have as basis the results of a survey conducted in November 2007 in Oradea on a random stratified sample of 410 subjects. From these, about 66% live in flats from buildings built before 1990, these being the sub-sample on which I have conducted the analysis from this chapter

Variables

a. Community involvement

Community involvement was measured in our survey through three scales with a different referent: a factual scale regarding the subject, another regarding members of the family and one measuring subject's disponibility for participation.

Table 1. During the last 12 months have you participate at the following activities?

	NO	YES	It was not the case	I do not know	no answer
Participation at a public meeting regarding the neighborhood's problems	69,8	19,0	10,5	,3	,3
Participation at a public meeting regarding the building's problems	41,6	51,5	5,9	,7	,3
Voluntary contributions for the neighborhood	44,9	46,9	6,6	,3	1,3
Voluntary contributions for the building	75,4	13,1	9,8	,7	1,0
Making formal notices regarding neighborhood's problems	77,7	10,2	9,8	1,0	1,3
Church Donations	42,6	53,1	1,3	1,0	2,0
Help for poor	34,1	60,0	2,3	,7	3,0
Discussions with neighbors regarding solutions for area's problems	48,7	41,8	6,6	1,3	1,6

Table 2. During the last 12 months have anybody from your family participate at the following activities?

	NO	YES	It was not the case	I do not know	no answer
Participation at a public meeting regarding the neighborhood's problems	62,3	23,3	5,2	7,5	1,6
Participation at a public meeting regarding the building's problems	43,9	43,9	3,9	6,2	2,0
Voluntary contributions for the neighborhood	47,5	39,0	4,6	6,9	2,0
Voluntary contributions for the building	69,7	13,5	6,9	7,9	2,0
Making formal notices regarding neighborhood's problems	72,1	11,1	6,9	7,5	2,3
Church Donations	38,4	49,5	1,6	8,2	2,3
Help for poor	34,4	52,1	1,3	10,2	2,0
Discussions with neighbors regarding solutions for area's problems	49,8	35,4	3,3	9,5	2,0

Table 3. Would you participate at the following activities?

	NO	YES	It was not the case	I do not know	no answer
Public meeting regarding the neighborhood's problems	32,5	59,3	1,3	4,9	2,0
Public meeting regarding the building's problems	19,3	75,7	,3	2,3	2,3
Voluntary work for local problems	40,3	48,5	1,6	7,2	2,3
Making formal notices regarding neighborhood's problems	40,0	48,5	1,6	8,2	1,6
Church Donations	16,4	77,0	,7	3,3	2,6
Help for poor	8,9	85,6	,7	3,0	2,0
Discussions with neighbors regarding solutions for area's problems	19,7	73,1	,7	4,9	1,6

The most frequent, in the case of the 305 people who live in flats, are the philanthropical actions which reveals both socially altruist trends as well as respect for traditional social norms. A higher frequency for positive answer we have in the case of semi-voluntary collective actions in the neighborhood such as public meetings regarding the building's problems or "voluntary contributions" for the building. Each of the questions sets are valid scales with high fidelity ($\alpha > 0.7$), obviously after adding median scores for missing cases for each item. The three scores are strongly correlated, which indicates the fact that community participation's intensity characterizes in the same manner families as its members taken separately, and that these are indicated by the disponibility for participation. This result is significant as it allows the usage measures at individual levels for the family level.

The items of the first scale and those from the third we can create a score with a high fidelity ($\alpha = 0.854$, $N = 305$), which can be considered an individual community participation score. This score has an

range between 0 and 15, with a mean of 7.6 and a standard deviation of 3.8 points from the scale. This variable's histogram reveals a bi-modal distribution, with a peak at the null value of the scale - indicating that there is a significant category of subjects which neither participate nor have the disponsibility for it, and another peak for the high levels of the scale.

b. Functional biography

The relevant functional biography is indicated by the fact that one held leading positions and membership in political organizations of the communist regime. These were control structures for social activism and also promotion structures for higher status hierarchy, their capacity to indicate the adhesion to the communist ideology being obviously limited. As the social status is transmitted through family we introduced also items regarding holding leading positions for family members.

Table 4. Functional biography (percentages)

	NO	YES	Not the case
Did you hold a leading position before '89?	82,3	10,8	6,9
Have you been chief for at least three people before '89?	79,0	12,8	8,2
Currently, are you chief for at least three people?	84,6	9,5	5,9
Currently, some of your close relatives is chief for at least three people?	66,9	24,9	8,2
Before '89, have you been member of Communist Youth Union?	66,9	22,6	10,5
Before '89, have you been member of Communist party?	76,4	13,8	9,8
Before '89, did you hold leading position in CYU?	86,9	3,3	9,8
Before '89, did you hold leading position in the Communist party?	88,2	2,6	9,2
Before '89 did you hold a leading position at your working place?	81,0	10,5	8,5
Before '89 did you hold any other leading position?	86,2	4,9	8,9
After 1989 did you hold a political leading position?	94,1	1,0	4,9
After 1989 did you hold a leading position at your working place?	81,0	15,1	3,9
After 1989 have you been chief of your building?	91,5	4,3	4,3
After 1989 have you worked in tenants association?	91,5	4,6	3,9

I have presented the percentages in table no. 4 both to show that the organizational history of our apartment owners from our sample reflect known life stories, the distributions being dependent on the moment of life cycle at which the interview was conducted, as well as to warn about the fact that due to the reduced occurrence of some events (having political leading positions after 1990 or having leading positions in the communist party for example) some statistical tests will be difficult.

Relationship between community participation and functional biography

Testing the influence of leading positions or the membership in organizations of the communist regime was done simply, by calculating t test of means difference between those that answered positively at functional biography questions and those who gave negative answers.

Table 5. Moments of functional biography and community participation

	The mean score of community participation and t-test of differences between means		
	NO	YES	Not the case
Did you hold a leading position before '89?	7,51	9,06*	6,86
Have you been chief for at least three people before '89?	7,58	9,10*	5,88
Currently, are you chief for at least three people?	7,62	8,76	5,94
Currently, some of your close relatives is chief for at least three people?	7,40	8,76**	6,12
Before '89, have you been member of Communist Youth Union?	7,57	8,59*	5,94
Before '89, have you been member of Communist party?	7,85	7,74	5,80
Before '89, did you hold leading position in CYU?	7,81	8,30	5,83
Before '89, did you hold leading position in the Communist party?	7,78	9,75	5,57
Before '89 did you hold a leading position at your working place?	7,62	9,06*	6,00
Before '89 did you hold any other leading position?	7,70	9,60*	5,85
After 1989 did you hold a political leading position?	7,62	9,67	7,40
After 1989 did you hold a leading position at your working place?	7,40	9,02**	7,17
After 1989 have you been chief of your building?	7,58	9,69*	6,62
After 1989 have you worked in tenants association?	7,57	9,86**	6,58

*p<0,05; **p<0,01

Each situation between the above items corresponds to higher scores of community participation. Yet, mostly due to big standard errors generated by the small number of cases with positive answers, the differences are not significant using t-test. We can thus say that if we could repeat the survey on a larger number of cases more of the comparisons from the above table would be significant.

Discussion and conclusion

As expected, each situation of having a leading position or membership to communist party or communist youth union has a correspondent current score of community participation higher then in the cases when these situations were not recorded. More, people who say "it is not the case" to questions of functional biography have the lowest scores of community participation. This means that people from the generation of over 35 has the lowest disponibility for social participation.

Diverse leading positions held before 1990, the positions held after the Revolution, as well as membership in the Communist Youth Union have the strongest links with the measure of involvement in solving neighborhood's problems. From this result we can consider as explained at least one of the unclear social transformations of transition: the socially active persons from the present day are, generally, the same as those that were active in the old regime. The causes of this activism remain though unclear. The constant positive correlation between different functional moments and community participation suggest the manifestation of a general activism independent of political institutional or ideological context, consequent with the general participation mechanism developed by Conway and Hachen (2005). The same data support also the hypothesis of acquiring by the current participants specific civic competencies and identities at their work or in organizations in which they held leading positions.

The important impact of social context, revealed by the significant score of the item "currently one of the close relatives is chief for at least three people" warns us, on the other hand, that understating activism as a

matter of strictly personal determination, maybe psychological is a mistake. This correlation indicates the fact that we can talk of socially active families, as well as inactive families from the same perspective. Overtaking the naïve determinism of heredity or common socialization we believe that a plausible interpretation is that the resources for participation are transmitted through families as in the case of socio-economical status. The observation is more relevant as we know the fact that social involvement is influenced by actor's status resources, as educational level or occupational status.

Our results lead to several conclusions. First we find that holding a leading position before 1990 or the membership in the Communist Party is not necessarily the result of opportunism or ideological short-sightedness but rather the path of manifestation of a active personality under the conditions of that period. From this point of view, the communist organizations had, paradoxically, a rather positive effect on our lives. Second, we can think that any organizational responsibility or the mere participation in organizations can support the disponibility for social participation, either through acquiring civic competencies or by creating settings in which participatory roles can be learned and practiced. Third, it is highly probable that the participatory personality is not derived from a genetical heredity or mysterious psychoanalytical processes, but rather from social position - characteristic with an intergenerational reproduction trend - and specific with its culture.

Studies of this type must be improved with through analysis which should investigate with refined means the impact of context and biographical variables on participation. Managing civil society organizations as well as the resources for activism and leadership, along with the efforts of development could benefit from such a research area.

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