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# DIFFERENCES BETWEEN U.S. AND GERMAN ADULTS IN NATIVE-BORN AND MIGRANTS' PARTICIPATION IN VOLUNTEERING AS A DIMENSION OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

We examine civic engagement among immigrants and native-born adults in the United States (U.S.) and Germany, operationalized in this study as voluntary work or volunteerism. Data for the analyses are drawn from the PIAAC. Germany and the U.S. were selected from the countries participating in PIAAC initial data collection in 2012 as two large OECD countries with different histories of immigration and responses to migrants. In Germany, native-born individuals showed greater volunteerism than immigrants ( $\beta = 0.119, p < .001$ ) while in the U.S., no significant difference was apparent by immigration status ( $\beta = 0.031, p = .133$ ). These results are discussed in the paper relative to existing research literature and implications for adult education are suggested.

Keywords: Civic engagement; PIAAC; volunteerism

## PURPOSE

Adult education often aims to enable integration of migrants into their arrival countries, not only into labor markets and housing, but all aspects of civil society. Volunteering is an important aspect of civic engagement (Eikenberry, 2019) and can be a useful avenue for integration into communities. Participating in voluntary work may serve as a bridge to transcending perceived differences and building connections across homogeneous groups through informal learning (Guo, 2014; Nesbit, 2017; Ruiz Sportmann & Greenspan, 2019). This paper compares US and German migrants to native-born adults in both countries regarding their participation in voluntary work, as a dimension of civic engagement, with implications for both informal learning and adult education. This paper is part of a larger work comparing the civic engagement of immigrants in the U.S. and Germany (Rose et al., 2019).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Both the U.S. and Germany have long and complex histories of immigration, integration, and arguments over social cohesion, including arguments over the impact that newcomers -- arriving as immigrants -- have on social cohesion. Political scientists and sociologists have been studying the question of social cohesion for over one hundred years. Participation in the social and political life of a country are considered to be indicators of social cohesion of a society (Grotlüschen, 2017; Neymotin, 2014). Civic engagement is one aspect of this social cohesion. Ehrlich (2000) defines civic engagement as "working to make a difference in the

civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference” (Ehrlich, 2000, p. vi).

Civic engagement is operationalized in this study as voluntary work or volunteerism. Voluntary work may be formal or informal in nature. Formal volunteering usually requires membership in organizations. Informal volunteering may involve short-term activities in spontaneous groups, such as a neighborhood committee (Erlinghagen, 2013). Voluntary work can be pursued for humanitarian reasons (e.g., serving meals in soup kitchens) or to advance a cause (e.g., trying to improve the situation of marginalized groups or collecting signatures for a ballot measure).

Putnam (2000) raised questions about the impact of immigration on the social cohesion of democratic societies, and spurred studies investigating the impact of immigrant influx on social cohesion in host countries by examining both newcomer involvement in volunteering and possible spillover effect on native-born residents (Neymotin, 2014). Theoretically, involvement in civic engagement, including volunteering, might be one way for newcomers to become both more involved and accepted in their new homes. Yet, migrants in the U.S. and Germany are often under-represented and, in some cases outright excluded, in organized volunteering, particularly within “mainstream” organizations (Foster-Bey, 2008; Greenspan, Walk, & Handy, 2018; Simonson, Vogel, & Tesch-Römer, 2017), although it has been argued they might gain *bridging* social capital from such involvement (Lee & Moon, 2011; Putnam, 2000).

On the other hand, in a U.S. study, Nesbit (2017) found foreign-born individuals were even more likely than native-born individuals to volunteer for immigrant/refugee organizations. For a number of reasons, migrants may be more likely to engage in informal and/or episodic volunteering within ethnic communities than to volunteer in mainstream formal organizations. This may potentially lead to an undercounting of their volunteer efforts (Lee & Moon, 2011).

Regularly conducted surveys such as the Annual Volunteer Supplement of the Current Population and the German Freiwilligensurvey allow differentiation according to migrant background and several socio-economic variables (Simonson, Vogel, & Tesch-Römer, 2017). However, these are not internationally comparative surveys, and they do not offer knowledge on associations between volunteerism and competences, especially on literacy and language skills. Thus, our interest in using data gathered by the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). In addition to collecting data on skills (literacy, numeracy, and using digital technologies), the PIAAC also gathered data on socio-demographic variables (e.g., native-born or migrant status). One PIAAC background survey item queried respondents about their participation in voluntary work and is the basis for our analysis. In constructing the PIAAC, the Organization for Cooperation and Development (OECD) defined voluntary work as “doing work without pay for charities, political parties, trade unions or other nonprofit organizations” (OECD 2011, p. 46).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used the 2012 PIAAC U.S. and German Public-Use Data Files ( $N = 10,475$ ). Because of the ordinal nature of the outcome, and to facilitate comparisons, multigroup ordinal regression analysis was carried out using voluntary work for non-profit organizations (five ordinal categories, from *never* to *every day*) as the outcome and immigration status (born in Germany/U.S.) as the predictor. Differences in observed effects between countries

were assessed using the chi-square difference statistic in the multigroup models. Analyses were conducted with Mplus, and incorporated sampling weights and replicate weights.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows distributional information about the variables in the study by country (Germany vs. the U.S.), while Table 2 presents the results of the multigroup regression. As can be seen in Table 2, a statistically significant difference was observed between Germany and the U.S. in the effect of immigration status on voluntary work [ $\chi^2(1) = 9.11, p = .002$ ]. In Germany, native-born individuals showed greater volunteerism than immigrants ( $\beta = 0.119, p < .001$ ) while in the U.S., no significant difference was apparent by immigration status ( $\beta = 0.031, p = .133$ ). Regarding the effects of the control variables (i.e., age, education, skills) on volunteerism, a statistically significant difference was observed between Germany and the U.S. in the effect of problem-solving in technology-rich environments skill proficiency on volunteerism, although the simple effects of this predictor for each country were not statistically significant.

*Table 1. Frequency Distributions of Study Variables*

Variable		Germany	United States	Combined
Immigration status	Native-born	86.1%	85.3%	14.3%
	Not native-born	13.9%	14.7%	85.7%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Gender	Male	50.4%	49.1%	49.8%
	Female	49.6%	50.9%	50.2%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Work status (Last week—Paid work)	No	31.4%	31.7%	31.5%
	Yes	68.6%	68.3%	68.5%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Highest level of education	Less than H.S.	17.3%	14.8%	16.1%
	H.S.	47.2%	41.1%	44.3%
	Above H.S	35.5%	44.1%	39.6%
	Total.	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Age	16-19 years	7.8%	7.9%	7.8%
	20-24 years	8.0%	10.7%	9.3%
	25-29 years	9.2%	10.4%	9.8%
	30-34 years	8.6%	9.9%	9.2%
	35-39 years	9.8%	10.0%	9.9%
	40-44 years	12.3%	10.1%	11.3%
	45-49 years	12.9%	10.8%	11.9%

	50-54 years	11.6%	11.0%	11.4%
	55-59 years	10.1%	9.5%	9.8%
	60-65 years	9.7%	9.8%	9.7%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Voluntary work for non-profit organizations	Never	65.2%	44.3%	55.3%
	< 1x/month	12.2%	26.2%	18.8%
	< 1x/week but at least 1x/month	9.4%	14.8%	12.0%
	1x week but not every day	11.1%	12.2%	11.6%
	Every day	2.2%	2.5%	2.3%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*Table 2. Multi-group Regression Results for the Regression of Skill Proficiency, Gender, Years Worked, Work Status, Education, Age, and Immigration Status on Voluntary Work*

Effect	U.S. (N = 3962)				Germany (N = 4147)				Difference
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE(b)</i>	$\beta$	<i>z</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE(b)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>z</i>	$\chi^2(1)$
Native-born	0.101	0.067	0.031	-1.502	0.402	0.079	0.119	5.075***	9.11**
Years worked	0.005	0.003	0.069	1.71	0.004	0.004	0.047	1.00	0.12
Worked last week	-0.047	0.048	-0.020	0.978	0.026	0.043	0.010	0.592	1.16
Education	0.169	0.032	0.106	5.266***	0.093	0.040	0.059	2.316*	2.39
Age	-0.022	0.015	-0.058	-1.451	-0.002	0.019	-0.005	-0.099	0.75
Female gender	0.125	0.046	0.061	2.70**	0.011	0.047	0.006	0.25	3.60
Literacy skill	0.000	0.001	-0.003	-0.058	0.002	0.001	0.089	1.627	2.46
Numeracy skill	0.002	0.001	0.104	2.079*	0.003	0.001	0.140	2.574*	0.92
PS-TRE skill	0.001	0.001	0.048	1.061	-0.002	0.001	-0.074	-1.494	6.15*

*Notes.  $R^2 = .047$  (U.S.),  $R^2 = .065$  (Germany); \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Chi-square statistics have been averaged across models fitted with each set of plausible values; a single  $p$ -value was computed based on the probability associated with the average chi-square statistic obtained.*

## DISCUSSION

The discrepancy in overall rate of engagement in volunteer work between Germany and the U.S. reflected in Table 1 (65.2% of Germans do not volunteer as compared to 44.3 % of Americans) may be at least partly explained by differences between the two countries in the role of the state versus the role of non-governmental organizations in addressing social welfare (Eikenberry, 2019; Grotlüchen, 2017). The finding that native-born status was positively associated with volunteerism in Germany agrees with the general trend in literature

on volunteerism. Similar results have been reported from surveys of native-born and immigrant volunteer participation in Germany (Greenspan, Walk & Handy, 2018), Denmark (Qvist, 2018), and across other European countries (Voicu & Serban, 2014). Quist (2018) suggested the gap in volunteerism between non-Western immigrants and native-born residents might be due to how individuals are integrated into informal social networks. Other studies lend support to this argument, indicating the strong influence of recruitment within social networks on participation as a volunteer (Beyerlein & Bergstrand, 2016; Paik & Navarre-Jackson, 2011). Researchers have also posited that lower levels of engagement in mainstream volunteer organizations can be attributed at least in part to structural barriers, including lack of equal opportunities to participate or discrimination in recruitment or selection of volunteers (Greenspan, Walk, & Handy, 2018). A qualitative study of conceptions of volunteering among recent African immigrants in Canada similarly revealed immigrant perceptions of being excluded from volunteer roles within mainstream organizations, although the same immigrants were actively involved in formal and informal volunteer activities within their ethnic communities (Chareka, Nyemah, & Manguvo, 2010).

The lack of a significant relationship in our study between volunteerism and immigrant status in the U.S. contradicts both the German findings in this study and European and Canadian findings discussed above. This result is not altogether surprising, given a plethora of literature on the extensive civic engagement of immigrant and refugee populations in the U.S., including participation as volunteers, although notably more extensive volunteerism is described within ethnic communities than within broader “mainstream” organizations. Sources providing evidence include: Muñoz (2012), Tucker and Santiago (2013), and Waldinger and Duquette-Rury (2016) on various groups of Latino immigrants; Brettel and Reed-Danahay (2012), Chakravorty, Kapur, and Singh (2017), Lee, Johnson and Lyu (2018) and Wong (2013) on various groups of Asian immigrants; and Stepick, Rey, and Mahler (2009) on various immigrant communities. Notably, Lee, Johnson and Lyu (2018), who studied first generation Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Vietnamese residents of California, noted that correlates to participation as volunteers were not consistent across the four ethnic subgroups given culture specific differences—all the more reason to guard against unsubstantiated generalizations across even more variable immigrant populations.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

This study’s findings point to the willingness of native-born and immigrant adults to engage in volunteerism as a form of civic engagement and the importance of inclusive voluntary organizations. Nesbit (2017) considers volunteering as a powerful source of informal learning for adults and a means of acquisition of social capital for immigrants. Looking beyond what newcomers have to *gain* from their involvement as volunteers, at least one recent study suggests that rather than focusing on the possible negative impact on social cohesion resulting from increased levels of immigration, “researchers and practitioners should shift their view to recognize the strengths and capacities of newcomers who give back to their communities” (Weng & Lee’s, 2016, p.523). Similarly, interviews with both native-born and immigrant volunteers assisting recently arrived refugees in “Asylum-Cafes” in Germany, challenged the concept of insider-outsider, pointing to roles played by first generation immigrants as cultural mediators and by second generation immigrants as bridge-builders. These persons act as mentors to other volunteers as well as social consultants (Ruiz Sportmann & Greenspan, 2019). Building on such research, adult educators may discover the

benefits of recruiting first and second generation immigrants and refugees as volunteers for their adult education programs serving newcomers, while at the same time improving their own cross-cultural understanding through interaction with such volunteers. At the same time, research indicating the key influence of recruitment within social networks, or lack thereof, on volunteer engagement for both immigrant and native-born individuals (Beyerlein & Bergstrand, 2016; Paik & Navarre-Jackson, 2011) points to the importance that immigrants are also recruited to participate in broader volunteer activities rather than just those aimed at other immigrants. Such recruitment also has the potential to mitigate the lack of opportunity and discrimination which have been reported as adversely affecting participation of immigrants as volunteers in mainstream volunteer organizations (Chareka, Nyemah, & Manguvo, 2019; Greenspan, Walk, & Handy, 2018)

Further research is needed to examine the sociopolitical forces that currently influence participation of immigrants in both formal and informal voluntary work especially within mainstream organizations. This is particularly so as anti-immigrant sentiments have grown stronger since 2012 so that the implications for necessary program development and research in the field of civic adult education aimed at heterogenous and cross-cultural learners' groups come into the broader picture, too. Such research would reveal the degree to which current data comparing native-born and immigrant civic engagement through volunteering would reflect findings to this study based on 2012 data. This is critical in a political era when immigrants are portrayed as outsiders threatening the fabric of German and U.S. society. The research could also determine if U.S. findings are now more aligned with those in Germany in the current era.

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