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PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS OF THE FORMATION OF STUDENTS' SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

Abstract

This article examines the psychological mechanism underlying the formation of social responsibility among university students through engagement in volunteer activities. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, including questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and correlation analysis. Based on empirical data and modern scientific literature, the research identifies an integrated mechanism combining moral reflection, empathic engagement, and social identification. Quantitative results show that participation in volunteer activities significantly enhances students' levels of social responsibility, empathy, and moral reflection. Qualitative findings confirm the deepening of civic awareness and value orientations through volunteer engagement. The scientific novelty lies in substantiating a comprehensive psychological mechanism where moral reflection, empathy, and social identification jointly contribute to the development of social responsibility. Practical significance includes recommendations for integrating volunteer programs into the educational environment to foster active civic engagement among students.

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СТУДЕНТТЕРДІҢ ВОЛОНТЕРЛІК ҚЫЗМЕТІ БАРЫСЫНДА ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ЖАУАПКЕРШІЛІКТІ ҚАЛЫПТАСТЫРУДЫҢ ПСИХОЛОГИЯЛЫҚ МЕХАНИЗМДЕРІ

Аңдатпа

Мақалада студенттердің волонтерлік қызметке қатысуы арқылы әлеуметтік жауапкершілікті қалыптастырудың психологиялық механизмі қарастырылады. Зерттеуде негізгі әдістер ретінде сауалнама жүргізу, жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттар және корреляциялық талдау қолданылды. Заманауи ғылыми әдебиеттер мен эмпирикалық деректерді талдау нәтижесінде әлеуметтік жауапкершіліктің моральдық рефлексияны, эмпатиялық қатысуды және әлеуметтік сәйкестенуді нығайту арқылы қалыптасатыны көрсетілді. Зерттеу нәтижелері волонтерлік қызметтің студенттердің әлеуметтік жауапкершілік, эмпатия және моральдық рефлексия деңгейлерін едәуір арттыратынын көрсетті. Зерттеудің ғылыми жаңалығы — моральдық рефлексияны, эмпатиялық қатысуды және әлеуметтік қатыстылықты біріктіретін кешенді психологиялық механизмді негіздеу. Практикалық маңызы — білім беру ортасына волонтерлік бағдарламаларды енгізу арқылы студенттердің азаматтық белсенділігін арттыруға арналған ұсыныстар әзірлеу.

Түйін сөздер: әлеуметтік жауапкершілік; волонтерлік қызмет; моральдық рефлексия; эмпатия; әлеуметтік сәйкестену; психологиялық механизм; студенттер.

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ПСИХОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ МЕХАНИЗМЫ ФОРМИРОВАНИЯ СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТИ У СТУДЕНТОВ В ПРОЦЕССЕ ВОЛОНТЁРСКОЙ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ

Аннотация

В статье рассматривается психологический механизм формирования социальной ответственности у студентов в процессе участия в волонтёрской деятельности. В качестве основных методов исследования использованы анкетирование, полуструктурированные интервью и корреляционный анализ. На основе анализа современной научной литературы и эмпирических данных показано, что развитие социальной ответственности происходит через усиление моральной рефлексии, эмпатийной вовлечённости и социальной идентификации. Результаты исследования демонстрируют, что волонтёрская деятельность способствует существенному повышению уровня социальной ответственности, эмпатии и моральной рефлексии студентов. Научная новизна исследования заключается в обосновании комплексного психологического механизма, интегрирующего моральную рефлексию, эмпатийное вовлечение и осознание социальной принадлежности. Практическая значимость работы связана с разработкой рекомендаций по интеграции волонтёрских программ в образовательную среду для формирования активной гражданской позиции студентов.

Ключевые слова: социальная ответственность; волонтёрская деятельность; моральная рефлексия; эмпатия; социальная идентификация; психологический механизм; студенты.

INTRODUCTION. Social responsibility is considered as an integrative personal characteristic reflecting an individual's willingness to take into account the consequences of his actions for society and

strive to achieve the public good. According to the Qi (2024) study, there is a strong positive correlation between the level of social responsibility of students and their willingness to take an active civic position [1, p. 86].

Research by Celio et al. (2011) emphasize that the involvement of students in service-learning projects leads to the development of both cognitive and affective components of social responsibility [2, pp. 165-166]. Similarly, Boukraa (2024) found that participation in volunteer programs promotes the formation of prosocial attitudes, empathy, and social engagement [3, pp. 93-95].

Volunteering is considered as one of the effective mechanisms for the formation of social responsibility, since it provides students with a real experience of social interaction and promotes the development of their moral reflection (Reig-Aleixandre et al., 2024 [4, pp. 185-187]).

The definition of the essence of social responsibility also varies. For example, according to Koç (2024), social responsibility includes not only the willingness to follow social norms, but also active participation in activities aimed at the public good [5; 6, p. 13]. Thus, the concept of social responsibility integrates cognitive (awareness), emotional (empathy) and behavioral (activity) components.

An important contribution to understanding the nature of social responsibility was made by the studies of Aquino and Reed (2002), who emphasized the importance of moral identity as an internal motivational resource for socially responsible behavior [7, p. 1425].

Also, the results of a meta-analysis by Celio et al. (2011) confirmed that participation in service-learning programs contributes not only to the development of social responsibility skills, but also to the strengthening of students' personal identity [2, p. 167].

In the context of modern global challenges such as environmental crises, pandemics and the growth of social inequalities, the task of forming social responsibility among young people is becoming particularly relevant.

The purpose of the study is to identify and describe the psychological mechanisms of formation of social responsibility among students in the process of volunteering.

MATERIALS AND METHODS. The study was conducted from September 2023 to February 2024 at the Kazakh National Pedagogical University named after Abai (Almaty, Kazakhstan). The study involved 120 students between the ages of 18 and 23, studying in pedagogical training areas. Of these, 60 students had at least one year of volunteering experience, while 60 students had no volunteering experience. The groups were formed using the target sampling method to ensure gender and age balance.

To diagnose the level of social responsibility, an adapted scale of student social responsibility was used, developed based on the methodology of Reig-Aleixandre et al. [4, p. 185]. The scale includes 20 statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

The scales "Empathy" and "Perspective-taking" of the Interpersonal Reactivity Questionnaire (IRI), developed by M. Davis (1980) and confirmed in the Koç study, were used to measure the level of empathy [6, p. 14].

The assessment of the level of moral reflection was carried out using the Defining Issues Test (DIT) by J. Rest (1979), which allows determining the stages of moral development [8, p. 61].

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted among 40 student volunteers. The interviews included questions aimed at identifying motivation to participate in volunteer activities, awareness of changes in value orientations, and perception of a social role. Examples of questions:

— "How has volunteering influenced your understanding of social responsibility?"
— "Has your perception of social justice changed after participating in volunteer projects?"

The analysis of the interview texts was carried out by the method of thematic content analysis followed by quantification of the frequency of mentions of semantic units. During the analysis, three main themes were identified: the development of moral identity, the strengthening of empathic engagement, and the formation of social identity. The frequency of mentions of each topic was calculated as the percentage of respondents who expressed relevant opinions.

The quantitative data were processed using the SPSS Statistics 26.0 software. Descriptive statistics methods (averages, standard deviations), the Student's t-test for independent samples were used to check for intergroup differences, as well as the Pearson correlation coefficient to identify the relationships between the studied variables.

The ethical aspects of the study were observed in accordance with the provisions of the Helsinki Declaration: participation was voluntary, with prior notification and written consent of the respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION. The study obtained quantitative data reflecting the differences between students who participate in volunteer activities and their peers without similar experience in terms of social responsibility, empathy, moral reflection, and social identity. Data analysis showed that volunteers significantly outperform students without volunteer experience in all the characteristics studied (Table 1).

Table 1. Average indicators of social responsibility and its components among students

Indicator	Volunteers (M±SD)	Non-volunteers (M±SD)	t-value	p-value
Social responsibility (total score)	88,2 ± 5,7	70,6 ± 7,1	5,21	p < 0,01
Empathy	83,1 ± 6,0	68,0 ± 6,8	5,48	p < 0,01
Moral reflection	84,7 ± 6,4	69,2 ± 7,3	5,17	p < 0,01
Social identification	86,9 ± 5,5	71,1 ± 7,0	5,08	p < 0,01

To illustrate the differences obtained, a comparative graph of the average values for key indicators between volunteer students and students without volunteering experience was constructed (Figure 1).
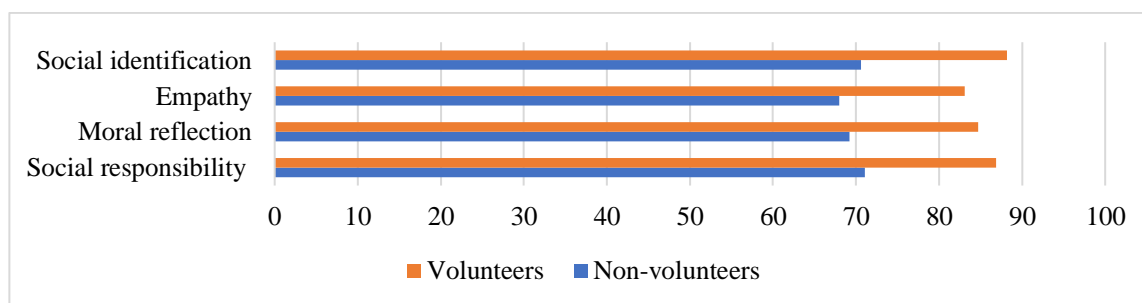

Figure 1 – Comparative analysis of the average indicators of social responsibility among students

As can be seen from Table 1 and Figure 1, volunteers demonstrate consistently higher rates in all key characteristics of social responsibility. Differences in the levels of empathy and moral reflection are particularly pronounced, which once again underlines the importance of volunteer experience for the formation of personal and social maturity of students.

As can be seen from Table 1, there are highly significant differences in all indicators at the level of p<0.01. The greatest difference is recorded in the level of empathy and moral reflection, which highlights the impact of volunteerism not only on behavioral, but also on cognitive and value aspects of social responsibility.

The analysis of these results in the context of modern theoretical models reveals their deep psychological nature. The growth of empathy among volunteers corresponds to the results of Boukraa [3, p. 95], which showed that regular participation in volunteer projects enhances social skills and the ability to accept other people's perspectives. Our data show a similar trend: volunteers show higher empathic engagement.

The indicators of moral reflection among volunteer students are also significantly higher than those of students without volunteering experience. This is consistent with the results of the Reig-Aleixandre

N. study. [4, p. 109], where participation in socially oriented projects contributes to the development of value orientations.

The results are also consistent with the data of Celio C.I., Durlak J. and Dymnicki A. [2], who confirmed in their meta-analysis that participation in service-learning projects promotes the development of personal responsibility and social engagement of students.

Additionally, Börü (2017) notes that students involved in volunteer activities demonstrate a higher willingness for collective action and social support [5]. This also echoes the results of K.J. Karkina (2018), who emphasizes the educational potential of volunteerism in the formation of civic competencies [9].

Based on our data, it can be argued that volunteerism is an effective mechanism for developing social responsibility among young people, confirming the conclusions presented in international studies (for example, Qi J. (2024) and Boukraa I. (2024).

Thus, the quantitative results of the study indicate a comprehensive positive impact of volunteerism on the development of students' social responsibility through increased empathy, moral reflection and social identity, which confirms modern scientific ideas about the mechanisms of pro-social personality development.

For a deeper understanding of the processes of formation of social responsibility among students, a qualitative analysis of the statements of participants in semi-structured interviews was conducted. The study involved 40 students who completed a semi-structured interview. The questions concerned their motivation to participate in volunteer activities, changes in their worldview, perception of their social role and personal experience of participating in social initiatives.

The students' responses were rich and nuanced, but a number of typical formulations can be identified that reflect the key mechanisms of pro-social development.

In the field of social identity, students often noted awareness of their own contribution to the development of society ("I began to feel that my efforts are important to others", "Now I understand that my actions affect the common good"), a sense of belonging to a social group ("I feel like part of a large community of people who care about fate others") and pride in participating in socially significant initiatives ("Participating in projects gave me the feeling that I was doing something important for the country").

In terms of empathic engagement, respondents mentioned empathy for vulnerable groups ("After communicating with elderly volunteers, I began to feel someone else's pain much more acutely"), developing the ability to understand other people's difficulties ("Now I understand other people's emotions better, even without words") and the desire to provide real help ("I can no longer just to pass by when someone needs help").

Along the line of moral reflection, the answers included ideas of rethinking social justice ("Justice is not an abstract idea, but the need to act fairly in life"), awareness of personal responsibility for the public good ("If everyone thinks only of themselves, society will fall apart") and a critical attitude towards their own actions ("I began to wonder questions: am I doing the right thing about others?").

To systematize qualitative data, a summary table was constructed reflecting the frequency of mentioning specific topics in interviews (Table 2).

Table 2 – Frequency of mentioning key aspects of social responsibility based on the results of thematic content analysis of interviews with student volunteers

Psychological mechanism	Subcategory (response code)	Number of mentions (n)	Percentage of respondents (%)
Social identity	Awareness of contribution to the development of society	28	70%
	Feeling of belonging to a social group	26	65%
	Pride in participating in socially significant activities	20	50%

Empathic involvement and empathy	Empathy for vulnerable groups	26	65%
	Understanding other people's difficulties and emotional states	24	60%
	The desire to help specific people	22	55%
Moral reflection	Rethinking the concept of social justice	23	58%
	Awareness of personal responsibility for the public good	21	53%
	Critical attitude towards one's own actions	19	48%
	Understanding the need to adhere to moral standards	18	45%

The respondents noted that participating in volunteer projects increased their awareness of belonging to society. The students' statements ranged from direct statements like "I began to feel that my actions are important not only for me, but also for others" to more complex reflections like "Now I perceive my role in society as part of a common mechanism for helping others." These data emphasized that in the context of digitalization of education, the formation of students' social responsibility is associated with increased awareness of their own social role.

The development of empathy manifested itself in a variety of descriptions of cases of empathy: "When I saw how difficult it was for others, I couldn't stay away," "Helping others made me feel how intertwined our destinies were," and "I began to understand other people's pain and joy much more deeply." These observations are confirmed in the Jidong Qi study (2024), which found that active participation in social initiatives promotes the development of empathy as a component of social responsibility [1, p.87].

The student volunteers' rethinking of moral attitudes manifested itself in various aspects: "I began to think about my responsibilities to others, not just my rights," "I realized that justice begins with personal actions," "I realized that irresponsibility in small things leads to big social problems." These changes correspond to the conclusions of the Sumeyye Koç study (2024), according to which participation in social projects promotes the development of values such as responsibility, honesty and respect [6, p.14].

Additionally, the analysis showed that participation in volunteer projects enhances the processes of interiorization of social norms and altruistic attitudes, which is confirmed by the conclusions of Aquino and Reed on the role of moral identity as a motivational mechanism of social behavior [7, p.1423].

The ideas of Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki (2011) were also confirmed, having established in a meta-analysis that participation in service-learning programs leads to the development of social skills, responsibility, and empathy [2, p.172].

Thus, the qualitative data from our study show that volunteerism plays an important role in shaping social responsibility through mechanisms:
- enhance social identity;
- developing empathic engagement;
- strengthening moral reflection.

These conclusions are fully consistent with modern scientific approaches to understanding the mechanisms of personal civic maturity formation in the process of social activity.

The results of the study were compared with data from international studies on the role of volunteerism in shaping students' social responsibility in different socio-cultural contexts.

An analysis of research conducted in Spain has shown that students' participation in volunteer projects contributes to the development of both emotional maturity and sustainable social responsibility. In particular, a study by Xavier Montagud Mayor and Maribel Martín Estalayo (2024) showed that the level of satisfaction from volunteerism directly correlates with the development of such personal qualities as responsibility for the public good, willingness to work collectively and sustainable moral behavior [10, p.6]. Our data on the high level of social identification and moral reflection among volunteers are fully consistent with these conclusions.

A comparison with the results of studies in the United States confirms the importance of participation in social activities for the development of cognitive and affective components of social

responsibility. In our study, the higher rates of empathy and moral reflection among volunteer students can be explained precisely by these processes of cognitive-affective development.

Data from European studies, in particular the work of Hoskins et al. (2012), show that the experience of volunteering significantly strengthens students' sense of civic responsibility, desire for an active social position and willingness to participate in public initiatives [11]. The high rates of social responsibility and social identification among volunteers observed in our study correspond to these international results, confirming the universality of mechanisms for the formation of social responsibility in the process of voluntary activity, regardless of cultural differences.

To confirm our data, we can also cite a study by Celio, Durlak and Dymnicki (2011) conducted in the USA. Their meta-analysis showed that students' participation in service-learning programs leads to significant development of social skills, pro-social orientation, and empathic engagement [2, p.172].

In addition, the results of the Boru (2023) study confirm that social practices in educational institutions contribute not only to the development of social responsibility, but also to the strengthening of the values of collectivism and social justice [5].

Thus, a comparison of the data obtained with international studies confirms the universal nature of the impact of volunteerism on the development of key personal components of social responsibility: empathy, moral reflection and social identity. This indicates the importance of including volunteerism programs in the educational strategies of higher education institutions as an effective means of forming mature civic positions among students.

The theoretical substantiation of the mechanisms of formation of students' social responsibility identified in the study is based on a number of well-established concepts of social and moral psychology.

One of the key explanatory approaches is the theory of moral identity proposed by Aquino and Reed (2002), in which moral responsibility is considered as an integrated part of the structure of the human self [7, p. 1424]. According to this model, an individual who perceives himself as a "moral subject" is more likely to exhibit socially responsible behavior. The data obtained in the study on high moral reflection among volunteer students confirm this model, since participation in volunteer activities contributes to the formation of stable moral self-identification. Moral identity includes:

- cognitive component: awareness and acceptance of moral norms as part of one's own Self-concept;
- affective component: emotional attachment to moral values.

Our data on high moral reflection among volunteer students confirm this model: participation in volunteer activities helps strengthen both rational understanding of moral principles and their emotional acceptance, which enhances internal motivation for pro-social behavior.

Another important foundation is the theory of social identity by Tajfel and Turner (1979), according to which acceptance of group values and identification with it enhance intrinsic motivation to follow socially accepted norms, including norms of responsibility [12]. Acceptance of group norms enhances intrinsic motivation for socially acceptable behavior and strengthens a sense of responsibility for the collective good. In the context of our study, the high social identification of volunteers indicates that participation in volunteer communities activates mechanisms of group pressure and positive reinforcement, contributing to the development of a stable civic position.

Of particular importance in understanding the development of social responsibility is the theory of empathic altruism by Batson (1991), in which empathy is considered as the main psychological mechanism of motivation for altruistic and responsible actions [13]. It is important to distinguish between:

- cognitive empathy: the ability to understand the emotional states of another;
- affective empathy: the ability to respond emotionally to other people's experiences.

The increased levels of empathic engagement among student volunteers in our study indicate that both cognitive and affective empathy are powerful drivers of internalizing social norms and activating behavior aimed at the public good.

An important contribution to explaining the cognitive component of the development of social responsibility is made by the concept of reflexive thinking, presented in the works of Reig-Aleixandre and colleagues (2024). Research has shown that specially organized educational practices with elements of volunteerism contribute to the development of:

- ethical reflection: the ability to critically reflect on moral dilemmas;
- social reflection: understanding the relationship between personal actions and social development [4]. Such reflexive activity contributes to building a stable system of value orientations focused on responsibility, justice and respect for others.

Thus, it can be concluded that the integration of moral identity, social identity, cognitive reflection and empathic engagement ensures the comprehensive development of social responsibility among students. Volunteering, stimulating these psychological mechanisms, becomes the most important means of forming a mature civic position and conscious participation of young people in solving social problems of modern society.

The results of our study fully correspond to these conclusions, demonstrating the systemic impact of volunteer practice on key personal mechanisms of social responsibility of students. Thus, the theoretical analysis confirms that the development of social responsibility in the process of volunteerism is based on the holistic integration of moral identity, social identification and empathic engagement, which makes volunteer projects an important tool for fostering a mature social position of students. The analysis of quantitative and qualitative research data confirmed the existence of a significant positive impact of volunteering on the formation of social responsibility among students. Statistically significant differences between volunteers and students without experience in volunteerism were found in all the components studied: social responsibility, empathy, moral reflection, and social identification. Particularly pronounced differences were found in terms of empathic engagement and moral reflection, which indicates a deep personal rethinking of values among students who actively participate in social activities. A qualitative analysis of interviews with student volunteers revealed the main psychological mechanisms of social responsibility formation: the development of a sense of social belonging, strengthening empathy and the formation of moral reflection. The high proportion of respondents who emphasize a change in their life attitudes and perception of their own role in society confirms the presence of a deep internal transformation of value orientations under the influence of volunteer activity. A comparison of the data obtained with international studies (Montagud Mayor & Estalayo, 2024; Hoskins et al., 2012) showed that the impact of volunteerism on the development of social responsibility is a universal phenomenon that manifests itself in various cultural contexts. This indicates a high degree of reliability and generalizability of the results obtained. Theoretical justification based on the model of moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002), theories of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and theories of empathic altruism (Batson, 1991) have made it possible to explain the discovered relationships and confirm the systemic nature of the development of social responsibility through volunteerism. Based on the results obtained, it is advisable to recommend the integration of volunteer work programs into the curricula of higher education institutions as one of the key tools for fostering social responsibility among students. Special attention should be paid to creating conditions for reflexive reflection on the experience of volunteer practice, stimulating group identification of students with socially oriented values and developing empathic skills. Thus, the presented research has confirmed the importance of volunteering as an effective means of shaping students' social responsibility, revealing the main psychological mechanisms of this process and pointing out ways to develop them purposefully in an educational environment.

CONCLUSION. The results of the comprehensive study revealed the significant impact of volunteering on the formation of social responsibility among students. Statistical analysis of quantitative data showed the presence of highly significant differences between volunteers and students without experience in volunteer projects in all key characteristics: general social responsibility, empathy, moral reflection and social identification. The most pronounced differences were recorded in the levels of empathic engagement and moral reflection, which indicates a deep personal and value rethinking among students actively involved in volunteer practice.

Qualitative research conducted by the method of thematic content analysis of semi-structured interviews has allowed us to deepen our understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying the development of social responsibility. The student volunteers focused on three main aspects of personal transformation: the formation of social identity, the strengthening of empathic engagement and the development of moral reflection. The data obtained confirmed that participation in volunteer projects contributes not only to awareness of one's social role and involvement in the common good, but also to the deepening of moral attitudes, as well as the development of the ability to critically reflect on personal actions in a social context.

Based on the data obtained, it can be concluded that volunteer programs are highly effective as a tool for fostering social responsibility among students. Volunteering contributes to the formation of a mature civic position, readiness for social interaction and the ability to take responsibility for the public good. Thus, the integration of volunteerism into the educational programs of higher educational institutions seems to be a necessary measure for the development of social maturity and civic engagement of young people in modern conditions.

Of particular importance is the creation of an educational environment that supports students' reflexive understanding of their own volunteer work experience. It is only in the context of targeted pedagogical support that the fullest possible disclosure of the personal potential of volunteerism as a means of forming social responsibility is possible.

In the future, it seems advisable to study the impact of the organization of volunteer activities (for example, the duration of participation, the nature of projects, the degree of structuring of activities) on the dynamics of social responsibility formation. Another relevant area may be the analysis of the role of digital forms of volunteerism and their comparative effectiveness in relation to traditional models of social activity.

Thus, the presented research has convincingly confirmed the importance of volunteering as one of the key mechanisms for the formation of students' social responsibility, revealing both quantitative differences and qualitative changes in the value orientations and social self-awareness of students.

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