SOCIAL FACILITATION: THE KALININGRAD REGION AND RUSSIAN MAINLAND REGIONS

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The authors look at the concept of social facilitation as a possible component of Russian social consolidation in the course of social reforms. The article focuses on the results of an empirical study of the levels and characteristics of competence in social facilitation, which is here understood as the ability to apply certain knowledge and systems of skills and as a success rate of actions based on experience in improving the conditions of social development. The study was conducted in the Kaliningrad region in 2012—2013. The data was obtained through a survey of 400 respondents using the authors' methodology encompassing eight basic elements of competence and a structured interview aimed at a better understanding of the subject of the study and attitudes towards it. The data is compared against the results of a similar study in two regions of central Russia with similar conditions.

The results suggest a disharmonic and inconsistent structure of competence in social facilitation, low motivation for social activity in youth, and a narrow range of ideas about possible areas of personal activities in the current conditions. Gender differences are identified in the level and structure of competence.

The authors believe that certain differences in competence components identified through mathematical methods are determined by the geographical characteristics of the Kaliningrad region — its exclave nature, a relatively small territory, and proximity to the EU countries. It is stressed that the regional conditions affecting motivation, forms and areas of activities, and structure of experience should be taken into account in selecting means and methods of organising youth activities. They can also serve as a basis for the regional youth policy.

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Achieving political unity and mobilizing joint effort to address the challenges of modern society are among the top priorities on today's social, political and economic agenda. Both Russian and foreign scholars have addressed pro-social activity of individuals [1; 4]; yet few studies have been done on facilitating joint pro-social effort.

While the issue was, in fact, discussed in philosophy, social studies, psychology and pedagogics, it has not become a subject of applied studies since the early Soviet pedagogy (founded by A. Makarenko, V. Sukhomlinsky, K. Ushinsky and others) and its later iterations (as signified by the works of I. Ivanov, F. Shapiro, A. Mudrik). Western scholars, not big fans of the "collective", would still consider studying it in the 20th century (See H. Triandis et al., G. Hofstede) [5; 8] and in more recent years (see D. Newman or R. LeFebvre) [6; 7]. Most of these studies, however, were carried out within the framework of philosophy or cultural studies, rather than pedagogy.

Pro-social activity of an individual within a group can be called "social facilitation". Within the framework of this study, social facilitation is understood as a joint systematic pro-social initiative, which results in improved social interaction and advancement in social and cultural development of the group [3]. Hence, a competence in social facilitation is an ability to apply one's knowledge and skills within said joined effort, as well as the success of individual actions directed at improvement of social interation and advancement of social and cultural development.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of social facilitation to the development of a society trying to find new unifying ideas; a society that has already rejected individualism and consumerism as two ideologies that hinder its progress.

Aims and Objectives

In 2012—2013 we carried out a study among the Russian youth to determine the level and structure of their competence in social facilitation. The study had the following objectives:

1. Evaluate the level of competence in social facilitation among the Russian youth;

2. Identify specific features of competence in social facilitation among the Kaliningrad youth;

3. Establish logical connection between the type of competence in social facilitation of the Kaliningrad youth and the geopolitical status of the Kaliningrad region.

Method

To better analyze the results we used the combination of the testing methods and interviews with the respondents. This combined methodology is especially relevant for an empirical study, because it helps us draw a full picture of competence in social facilitation among youth, and provides standardized datasets that can be further analyzed mathematically. It also helps to explain and untangle the most complicated cases that are typically difficult to interpret.

The questionnaire we used is based on the Likert scale typically employed for auto-evaluation of individual responses to the survey. The structure of the questionnaire mirrors the structure of competence in social facilitation as described by one of the co-authors of this paper. It consists of eight principle elements (scales): awareness of global issues of modern society; motivation for social facilitation; individual values/goals; experience of social facilitation and its evaluation; personal qualities and ambition (as a measure of readiness for action); determination to engage in social facilitation; orientation towards partnership in pro-social activities. We then evaluated the levels of each components of competence in social facilitation by using the updated version of the method first introduced in 2012 [3].

The survey was conducted in one-to-one and group settings, in the first half of the day, in normal environment. The survey includes a substantial number of questions, but we didn't experience any setbacks during the study. Some respondents were unsure how to answer a number of questions of the first two parts of the study, but we solved the issue by assisting them in understanding the questions. On average, it took the respondents 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire, as per the standard.

The interview included three standard questions and additional questions that may have been asked depending on the situation. These would include questions to make sure that the interviewees understand the task, to evaluate their attitude to social facilitation as a modern pro-social practice, to specify possible issues with the method itself. These follow-up questions helped the respondents assess contradictions in their own responses and analyze the results. Microsoft Excel was used to process the resulting data.

Sample

Our sample included 400 young men and women aged 19 to 25 (M=19.5) from both urban and rural areas. Almost 75 % of all those surveyed were women. 88 % were university students. The study was conducted in Smolensk, Kaliningrad and Ryazan from September 2012 to September 2014, with Smolens and Ryazan respondents acting as controls in the study. The disproportionate share of women in the study is nonetheless quite representative of general structure of the student population.

Results

The first task was to evaluate the level of competence in social facilitation among the Russian youth, and here is what we found. Generally, most of those surveyed demonstrated a low awareness of global issues of modern society. They would point to environmental issues, economic crises, and problems of multicultural and multiethnic societies. Hardly any respondents, however, mentioned low personal involvement, individualism or lack of pro-social personal goals as acute problems of modern society. Almost all respondents (more than 95 %; with a confidence figure of 99 % and a confidence interval of ± 2.8 %) consider social interaction and learning to be sufficient motives to engage in social facilitation.

All respondents had identified their life goals, with a verifiable difference between men and women. Men were more likely to define their goals in terms of solving one of the global problems, which they would consider to be their single mission in life. Women, however, had a more dispersed set of goals, these goals were more down-to-earth, self-oriented and not framed in "mission-like" terms. Both men and women had well-defined goals that were directed at introducing positive social changes.

Most of the respondents had very little experience of social facilitation, and very little satisfaction from this kind of engagement. Social activism and human rights activism were named among the most common forms of social facilitation.

On average, the respondents showed: low level of social engagement; high self-confidence; high empathy and independence. The following characteristics were underdeveloped in all respondents: mutual trust, social responsibility, and ambition.

Preferred social activities were localized on the level of the city or the region.

On average, most of those surveyed were quite ready for social facilitation. They positively evaluated the idea of pro-social activity, however, they did not feel that the rest of their social group would appreciate and/or support such behavior.

General willingness to implement this intention was also quite high, as was the ability to empathize, to notice the problems of other people and understand that something needs to be done, yet very few of the respondents expressed readiness to take action and responsibility to help others. A lot of those surveyed cited the lack of relevant knowledge (or experience) to provide assistance and the lack of ability to ignore possible negative outcomes. As we had already established in our previous studies [2] and confirmed here, most of those surveyed (more than 70%; with a confidence interval of ± 6.8%) demonstrate a certain contradiction in the structure of their readiness for social facilitation and concrete actions.

There was a small difference between those who were partnership-oriented (about 60%, confidence interval of ± 7.1%) and those who were not.

Conclusions and Discussion

Overall index of competence in social facilitation was optimal and unstable for about half of those surveyed (53%; confidence interval of ± 7.4%). About 21% of those surveyed had advanced and stable competence in social facilitation (confidence interval of ± 6%), while only 16% of those surveyed demonstrated high and targeted competence in social facilitation (confidence interval of ± 5.6%). Fewer than 10% of the respondents had high and accentuated index of competence in social facilitation; these were the people, however, who made sure everyone would pay attention to them in a group interview setting. All in all, fewer than 5% of all those surveyed could be described as having very high and accentuated index of competence

in social facilitation, yet these students, according to their peers and educators, were most likely to display the very qualities our questionnaire was designed to reveal.

As we have already mentioned, there were a number of contradictions that we found in the responses.

First of them concerned low awareness of the global issues vs. high importance generally assigned to said issues. This can be explained by elevated emotional levels and a universal desire to give a socially appropriate answer while discussing problems of importance (as perceived from the media). On the other hand, this could be attributed to the awareness-raising work carried out within the system of higher education. Various education campaigns can form a relevant attitude; yet acting on this attitude requires higher awareness of the issues in question.

The second contradiction concerned the combination of positive motivation towards pro-social activity with the lack of relative experience. As we established during the interviews, most young people were unable to act upon their intentions because they had not been aware of the possibilities of doing that. This, again, could be explained by a pronounced theoretical bias of our awareness-raising efforts.

The third contradiction concerned elevated self-confidence, empathy and independent thinking levels vs. low levels of mutual trust, social responsibility and ambition. The former could be explained by the social status of those surveyed: all of them were graduate and undergraduate students, halfway through to a degree that would give them jobs in the spheres of education, psychology or sociology. Low trust could be attributed to a certain professional bias: these students would sometimes feel they know too much about people, they know they can be manipulated in communication. On the other hand, this could also be a result of their readiness to take positions in education management, or to emotionally support a client in a therapy session. Low ambition and social responsibility could thus be interpreted as lacking necessary awareness of the demands of future job. Young people demonstrating such results would work great when taking orders from others, but lack initiative and wouldn't take full responsibility for the consequences of their professional decisions.

The fourth contradiction was connected with the readiness for social facilitation: those surveyed positively evaluated single actions that could be classified as social facilitation, but felt that society wouldn't be accepting of such behavior. Such mindset makes people less likely to engage in social facilitation, even if a group is actively trying to overcome some global issues. This contradiction could stem from a certain double standard that the students acquire when the school and the family are teaching a different set of values.

The fifth — and final — contradiction is partially connected to the previous one and manifests by the willingness of those surveyed to take action. While many are ready to take said action, however, few of them are also willing to take responsibility, and readily speculate about possible risks of

social facilitation. Moreover, they tend to emphasize those risks citing possible negative reaction from their peers, society or family, which leads to denial and social pessimism.

Above average partnership orientation can be explained by the sample bias: all of those surveyed are young people who interact with their peers in a group setting on an almost daily basis.

At the same time, none of the respondents displayed a balanced profile, which underscores internal contradictions in the structure of competence in social facilitation.

The second objective of our study was to identify specific features of competence in social facilitation among the Kaliningrad youth (compared to the respondents living in the other regions of Russia, who constituted the control group in our sample). To calculate significant differences we used the t-distribution test, since the distribution of the characteristic in the sample was almost standard (with small asymmetry and excess near 0). We were not able to find any differences in motivation, ambition or social responsibility between the two groups. Both groups' willingness to engage in pro-social activity was characterized by the perceived easiness of the task, and the "readiness" scales for both groups of students showed similar results for social perception and empathy. There were no significant differences between the two groups in their awareness of global social issues (even with p-value of 0.05). It has to be noted, however, that the range of issues identified by the Kaliningrad youth was significantly wider. Kaliningrad natives would be more likely to cite violation of human rights, personal disengagement and passiveness among the hottest issues of contemporary civilization, while the respondents from the control group mentioned environmental issues, cross-cultural misunderstanding and poverty instead.

We found significant differences (p-value of 0.01) in personal aims of those surveyed. Thus, Kaliningrad youth were more likely to choose one major goal in life, have a higher awareness of personal mission, more pronounced desire to make the world a better place, and a better developed sense of pride for their actions. While the overall values were still quite low for the Kaliningrad sample, they were still significantly higher than those of the control sample.

There were also differences in the experience of social facilitation and attitude to social facilitation (p-value of 0.05), where the Kaliningrad sample scored a little bit higher than the control group. When asked about experience in social facilitation, Kaliningrad students were likely to cite social and civil rights activism.

As for personal qualities, the Kaliningrad respondents displayed higher degrees of pro-social orientation, self-confidence, independence, mutual trust and readiness for partnership. They demonstrated lower levels of misbalance in the social facilitation and readiness for action scales. They were also more likely to feel the support of other members of their group. The Kaliningrad youth were more inclined to interpret a situation as critical and requiring immediate action, but, not unlike the youth from the control group, they hesitated to take said action and assume responsibility for providing help and actively engaging in social facilitation.

The similarities between the two groups can be largely attributed to the influence of the system of formal education (standardized curricula) and awareness-raising campaigns (that are designed to stipulate certain personal and social values). The differences, however, are most likely connected with the unique geopolitical status of the Kaliningrad region.

This compact exclave gives its citizens a possibility to freely travel to the neighboring countries of Poland and Lithuania, which gives the younger population of the region a wider identity. The Kaliningrad youth are thus more likely to think on a more global scale and consider more global social issues to be more relevant.

The region, however, is surrounded by countries that are fiercely articulating their geopolitical independence from the former Soviet block, which widens the Us vs. Them gap, increases the unity among the local population and stimulates pro-social activity in the local youth, which can be seen from the local and global priorities described by the Kaliningrad young people. Because the region is relatively small, a lot of its pro-social projects are implemented on the regional level, but since they are, in a way, all encompassing (taking up the entire territory of the region), the youth are more likely to consider them to be of "global" importance.

The size and the isolation of the region intensifies its social, economic and political problems, stimulates public discussion of these problems and ultimately leads to better understanding of how to tackle them — as a society.

The results of this study allow us to conclude that the variations between the control and experimental samples are determined by the respondents' place of residence. Our conclusions can be used to formulate further youth-related policies on the regional level and to develop awareness-raising programs for all levels of formal education.

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