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# *“Rhetoric” of the Help-Giving Theory in the Service of the Italian Civil Protection Volunteers*

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## **Abstract**

The following article discusses theoretical considerations problematizing issues related to “help-giving” or the “gift of sacrifice”, and presents the service of volunteers of the National Service of Civil Protection in Italy. The authors of the paper support the thesis that (pro)social behaviors are a special type of structures fixing interpersonal relations. What’s more, they contribute to strengthening social capital in the situation of all kinds of threats. Verifying the thesis, the authors refer to the most important terms creating the meaning repertoire of the most adequate theoretical concepts. Although the significance of the gift theory is emphasized rarely in the field of social sciences, these concepts are not only extremely interesting cognitively, but also their explanatory value enriches our view of social reality. M. Mauss’s theory of transactions or exchange of gifts serves as a background for reflection on the service of volunteers of the Italian Civil Protection. The “gift of help” of volunteers for the communities affected by the threats of the forces of nature becomes an important driving force for rebuilding the social structure.

**Keywords:** Dedication to help-giving, Volunteering, Sociology.

## **Introduction**

Everyday life is shaped by an immeasurable number of acts undertaken, or deliberately not taken, those declared and actually manifested, legitimizing the human experience of social relations. Aspects of this type of behavior are extremely diverse. Hence, in social sciences attempts are made to problematize these issues to enrich the view on social reality. Social “production” or “construction” of behaviors is carried out in various circumstances, at the same time they become a co-called “binder” of various kinds of interpersonal relationships.

Taking into account the multiplicity of types of social behavior, it seems common to label them, as we find many reflections in this area of our special interest. Some categories of this type of interaction can be described as positive, some are received negatively, arousing reluctance, while others have a neutral status. Some behaviors benefit the parties of interaction, other destroy what has been built or act to the detriment of one of the parties. Each of these categories of deeds - pro-social or antisocial - shape the interpersonal relationships in a characteristic way. However, the most beautiful manifestation of social life are those acts that reinforce the structure of social relations.

The main theme of our considerations is voluntary activity undertaken by volunteers in the area of broadly understood public security. These studies are carried out by us as part of two separate research projects. The first project is of theoretical character and was carried out in 2017/2018 in the form of a sociological study on the issues of fire service conditions. The said project has been entitled: “*A Monographic Study of the Benefits of the Self-Sacrifice Gift and the Phenomenon of its*

*Splendor on the Example of Volunteer Fire Brigades*". These studies have been a continuation of the authors' reflection on firefighters introduced in 2015 as a sociological research on professional formations of the State Fire Service (Stochmal, 2015).

The second doctoral project has been carried out under the title: "*Constructing and Legitimizing the Pro-Social Identity of Volunteers in the Light of the Field Research in Italy on the Example of the National Civil Protection Service*". Discussed within the study issues are extremely interesting, inspiring, but simultaneously they are an amazing challenge, as they apply to both: the theory and practice of social life.

We do not have to convince anybody about the social and scientific significance of the issues being addressed. This issue has been present in various forms in interpersonal relations since ancient times. Among the most important, we can mention Greek philanthropy, charity, volunteering, social assistance or any other kind of self-sacrifice for the benefit of the people in need. All these forms of sacrifice are, in their essence, practices "bonding" social structures and significantly strengthening social capital.

In contemporary societies, the gift is not an indispensable means of recreating its structures. However, there are circumstances in which it significantly strengthens social capital, consolidating the areas affected by the threat of destabilization in the form of, for example, ecological threats. Social capital is somehow "woven" by actions eagerly undertaken for the benefit of another human being who happens to be in need. The gift theory should not be reduced only to the exchange model, because it is inextricably linked with the self-sacrifice of the person who offers the gift (Pyyhtinen, 2014). Therefore, the reproduction of social structures requires this wonderful effort of one man towards another.

## **1. Rhetoric of the gift theory in academic considerations**

Looking for the grounds of this kind of act, we find a very interesting phenomenon of the rhetoric of sacrifice shaped from the beginnings of the existence of community life. By rhetoric, we mean here a reference to an adequate understanding of these practices, the process of their argumentation, and their unbiased judgment. The theory of the "help-giving" remains the concept of rhetorical argumentation for the benefit of other people's good. Doing good remains a rhetorical figure of the acts of thoughts and words expressed through acts of action. The structures of rhetorical figures can take various forms. However, their common feature is that these acts are the most valuable gifts possible. In social spaces, we notice many different patterns of offering "the gift of help", the parties of interaction experience them due to the role they play in these relations. Different role will apply to the giver of good, different role is played by the person receiving the good. An adequate rhetorical figure describing the "gift of help" is meant to transform these acts of will into a form of understandable language message, along with the determination of their meaning (Edmondson, 1984 p. 24 and p. 27) and the identification of possible patterns. Sociological construction of patterns of offering "the gifts of help" will be the objective of our cognition. We will "assemble" them from individual cases, segregating them on the basis of similarity and creating adequate constructs.

What distinguishes volunteerism the most is the fact that it is an extraordinary gift of the sacrifice of one man for the benefit of another person, made in order to

defend or protect the values precious to them. The development of this special form of sacrifice has been carried out since ancient times and is continued in modern forms. The implications of this phenomenon are extremely important, because caring for another person remains the expression of realizing the best (pro)social instincts. The (pro)social act is realized by sacrifice, because we sacrifice our good for someone else’s good, not necessarily expecting to multiply our own goods (Ossowska, 2002 p. 171). Things we can offer take different forms. However, the most valuable gift is everything that cannot be bought in any way.

Undertaking attempts to explore a selected area, we are interested not only in the content of the analyzed issues, which serves the processes of scientific operationalization in the context of selected theoretical perspectives, but also helps to learn more about the connections between them. We are looking for interesting relationships between the studied Durkheim’s “social facts” (1982 p. 57 and next), systematize them, determine their dynamics, and explain or interpret with more general assertions. When referring to M. Mauss’s achievements, Erving Goffman also points out that “Total social facts are phenomena that penetrate every aspect of the social system, they concentrate it and constitute its focus, they are the constitutive elements and the generators and motors of the system” (Sykes, 2005 pp. 3-4). Therefore, a gift continues to be a significant social fact - the cornerstone of all social communities.

The phenomenon of gift in the context of social sciences is considered from different points of view. Bearing in mind the accepted structure of the sociological reasoning, which unfortunately is a limited quantitatively possibility of presented issues, we will narrow our considerations to the concept authored by Marcel Mauss and present criticism of his position in fragments where they have been reviewed. Without a doubt, Marcel Mauss began an important French research tradition in anthropology and sociology in the context of “the gift”. He was the first to “pave” the way of problematization of the question of “the gift”, “smoothed out” the way of understanding its phenomenon and showed a different view on the act of giving. It should be noted that in the works of M. Mauss, we may easily notice the mentor spirit of Émile Durkheim.

In 1925, Marcel Mauss published an essay about “the gift” entitled: *The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1923-1924). His work has been translated into many languages. Due to the gained popularity, the presented theory has been objectively evaluated by researchers from various scientific backgrounds and has been developed and updated in a natural way. Studying and comparing the cases observed in Polynesia, Melanesia<sup>1</sup> and in the Northwestern part of the United States, Marcel Mauss describes gift as a holistic social fact. The social fact of the gift is realized in the regime of cultural practice implemented by the acts of exchange and benefits assessed holistically, from the beginning to the moment of its reciprocation. M. Mauss’s morphology of the theory of exchange builds a triadic mechanism of obligations, which we can bring to the following components:

“Why is it that, in so many societies, at so many periods and in such different contexts, individuals and/or groups feel obliged not only to give, or when someone gives to them to receive, but also feel obliged, when they have received, to reciprocate what has been given and to reciprocate either the same things (or its equivalent), or something more or better?” (Godelier, 1999 p. 10).

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<sup>1</sup> The studies concerned among others the Trobrianda Islands, where Bronisław Malinowski studied the Kula exchange tradition.

Maurice Godelier is undoubtedly the one who most complexly synthesizes Mauss's *enigma of the gift*, understood as the obligation to give gifts, receive them and reciprocate. The meaning of these acts can be described as the theory of transaction or exchange of gifts. These undoubtedly simple social relations are not as ordinary as it may seem, and certainly cannot be underestimated. Let us then trace the terminological meanings that problematize the social phenomenon of exchanging gifts and the forces that guide them, discovering their complexity in the layers forming the phenomenon of gift.

### 1.1. *Obligation to give*

Mauss's considerations concern the exchange of gifts taking the form of *holistic benefits of an antagonistic type* (2001, p. 112). These benefits can be realized between individuals and wider social circles, the object of exchange can be both tangible and intangible goods, the service take on a voluntary form, but they can also become an element of a cultural norm. Thus, the practice of gift-giving imposes on the parties of the transaction the burden (the value of the gift or gift-for-gift), obligations (handing the gift on or detaining it) and the obligation to reciprocate. Gift and gift-for-gift (or benefit and counter-benefit), only seemingly seems to be a balancing relationship, because gift-for-gift is required, not given back, and the gift received can be passed in the social space to other people, "weaving" a network of new social relations.

To offer something as a gift means that we voluntarily give our gift to a person or a group of our own free will. This action should be feasible, so there are no contraindications on the part of the recipient to accept it. Presentation of the gift thus generates a variety of status mechanisms on both sides of the interaction. The gift practice produces and maintains interpersonal social relations. The offering of gift in the social space is treated as a kind of ritual, embedded in complex web of chain relations. The theory of the gift shows models of shaping social relations in a specific social structure between the parties connected with each other by a binding relation resulting from the act of giving. The gift in its significance produces and shapes forms of bonds that fasten human relationships.

Handing on any gift in related groups has been a common practice. In these kinds of groups, the gift has consolidated and strengthened existing social relations. In unrelated groups, the gift has "created" an opportunity to shape new social relations. The type of these relations has been dependent on the status of people entering into a gift transaction. The source literature clearly differentiates the interpretation of gift translation depending on the status position of the parties involved. This status can be equal, higher or lower. As a consequence of this status, the gift practice "generates" different implications.

The gift is supposed to bring people together, the participants of this act have a special bond, because "bond through things is a bond of souls, because the thing itself has a soul, it is from the soul. It turns out that to offer something to someone is to offer something of oneself" (2001, p. 181). Donator, however, gains a higher status due to the gesture of giving the gift. He showed solidarity, sharing with others what he owns. A relation of the donor's superiority over the recipient is revealed, motivated by good intentions. In turn, the recipient, taking a gift, takes a lower position, becoming the donor's debtor. Thus, the gift legitimizes the divergent (antagonistic) statuses of actors involved in this context of action. The gift is

also practiced when the donor has a lower status than the donated. We deal with such situations for example in acts of religion.

The gift may take material or non-material form. The material figure explains why people give things to others. Material gifts circulate in the social space, they remain in circulation until they return to the owner. M. Mauss stated that the power distributing exchangeable things lies in cultural rules, especially in the aspects of religious beliefs. This view was corrected only by Claud Lévi-Strauss, who caught this methodological error of reasoning. He pointed out that, in fact, it is not about the system of beliefs, but about the “indefinite semantic value that is itself meaningless, and thus can take any meaning” (Mauss, 2001, p. 34). Social relations are regulated through the systems of meanings that the actors attribute to all practices. The author has developed this more extensively in his work entitled *Structural Anthropology* (1963). This symbolic logic is applied in qualitative sociology when formulating conclusions about the transactional nature of the exchange. The symbolic dimension is more important than the imaginary dimension. The symbolic dimension is created by the community in the course of its development, the imaginary dimension applies to individual people who may lack awareness of the essence of the matter or the problem under consideration. These individual ideas can take the form of mock cognition. In this phenomenon, we also find the essence of the rhetoric of the gift theory. This theory is saturated with symbols whose meaning should be deciphered in the available pattern of linguistic communication.

With regard to material gifts, M. Mauss distinguished gifts that are exchangeable (gifts, gifts-for-gifts and other forms of exchange), and those that are not meant to be subject to exchange. The rigor of excluding gifts from exchange reflected a different type of social bonds (building an individual or collective identity). The existence of exchangeable gifts results in a kind of a “motion” in the exchange mechanism. The exclusion of some gifts from this exchange also has an overwhelming effect on the exchange transaction. The gifts being subject to exchange circle around the gifts excluded from this exchange. They become its driving force and reference points. Maurice Godelier compares this situation to money, which has two roles. On the one hand, it enables the circulation of all goods, and on the other hand it becomes a measure of the intensity of this motion, as well as of its size.

Because the exchange remains the primeval phenomenon of social life, we will take a look at the other party of this interesting interaction, that is, individuals or groups receiving the gift.

### *1.2. Obligation to receive gifts*

Receiving gifts places an individual on the other side of the exchange transaction. By accepting a gift one becomes at the same time obliged to accept it. The donor himself works according to the principle of *do ut des*, “I give that you may take”, but also “I give that you may give back”. It is in a sense a claim or a demand formulated towards a recipient of donation. The accepted gift confirms the legitimacy of the social relations being shaped, it is a kind of confirmation of an unwritten agreement of such and not a different reaction to the gesture presented. The obligation to accept the gift also entails the need to consider whether this gift should be kept by the recipient due to its “sanctity”, or passed to others so as to make it an object “binding” social relations with others. Accepting a gift obliges individuals or groups to act in accordance with culturally established rules. The type of gift “negotiates” the relations between the parties of the interaction. The gift can be both a

blessing and a burden. An extremely accurate example illustrating the discussed issue is a request for help. A person in need, asking for help, is obliged to accept it.

### 1.3. *Obligation to reciprocate gifts*

The last obligation in the theory of gift is its reciprocation. We can define this obligation as a certain “pressure” in the recipients' conduct, in order to make amends for the good they have obtained. Realization of reciprocity embedded in the theory of gift takes place in the course of actions performed by social actors. The combination of these activities and their order reflect the specificity of “pressure” associated with the act of giving. This order is embedded in cultural practices, which means that forming it the rules and principles are accepted by the majority as naturally existing.

Mutuality is constructed through the act of giving at many stages of community life, from marriage, through the birth of children or their maturation, illness or death. This concept can also be applied to contemporary gift-giving practices. This reciprocity creates social relations that bind community members together. The principle of reciprocity is the most important mechanism of social cohesion.

In interpretation spaces, the Mauss's gift theory - as a kind of cultural heritage - continues to inspire many scholars to deepen this issue. Among the most notable ones we should mention Maurice Godelier (1999, p 18), Claude L'evi-Strauss (1987), Jacques T. Godbout (Godbout and Caillé, 1998), Helmuth Berking (1999) and Mark Osteen (2002) and others (Alain, 2016). Each of the proposed approaches constitutes a reflection on the gift in a specific theoretical order, regardless of whether we classify it as critical (Danermark *et al.*, 1997), reflective (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) or relational sociology (Donati and Archer, 2015).

The practice of giving from time immemorial still dynamizes the community life. All communities, in order to continue their existence, manifest this extremely interesting act of “the gift of sacrifice”. The presented theoretical background is necessary to unveil the arcana of the phenomenon of gift in the practice of volunteers serving in Italy and eagerly coming to the other people's rescue.

## 2. **Volunteers of Civil Protection**

The Voluntary Service of the Italian National Civil Protection Service has its origins in 1966, it was established during the Flood in Florence, which claimed 30 lives, not counting losses in historical-cultural and material goods. Armed in shovels civilians from all over the country, Europe and entire world came to help the flood's victims and save the cultural heritage of the world from the mud.

Similar situations occurred during the earthquakes in Friuli in 1976, which claimed thousand lives, and in Irpinia in 1980, which resulted in three thousand deaths. Always in similar circumstances, the response of ordinary people came sooner than the reaction of the state institutions: “The great spontaneous mobilization of citizens made us realize that there was no lack of solidarity with people, but of an organized public system that would be able to use it and emphasize its value. Since then, the Voluntary Service of Civil Protection unites religious and secular motives and guarantees the right to help everyone in a professional way”<sup>2</sup>. Realiz-

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<sup>2</sup> For the details see the website: <http://www.protezionecivile.gov.it/jcms/it/volontariato.wp>

ing the benefits of this solidarity and combined forces and capabilities of all citizens has become a stimulus to form the ranks of volunteers watching over their own security and the security of their community.

The Act No. 225 of 24 February 1992, establishing the National Civil Protection Service, made voluntary organizations to achieve the status of a “national operating structure” and become an integral part of the public system. In fact, voluntary resources and forces form the main element of this system: the list of the Italian Civil Protection Department includes over four thousand organizations from different regions of the country with a total number exceeding 1,300,000. members, covering 90% of the entire structure of this organization” (D’Angelis, 2009, p. 22). The task of volunteers is to watch over the security of their own territory, restore safety conditions in emergencies, support professional troops, protect and help residents of the state and people from other countries in natural disasters.

The volunteering service covers various stages of activity from the prevention of major threats, through monitoring the territory and actions to avoid or reduce possible destruction during various catastrophes or disasters, up to civil protection in the face of crisis situations, as long as necessary. The first duty of the Civil Protection volunteers’ organization is to protect the population from any threat, not only by monitoring and maintaining the security of the territory, but also by popularization of information and training activities in the field of citizen security.

The service of volunteer groups of Civil Protection is also associated with acquiring the necessary skills during courses and trainings in order to obtain various specializations in the field of rescue and care for the population and continuous improvement of competence. Obtaining the necessary preparation and systematic completion of qualifications require from the volunteers to spend a significant amount of time, especially during non-working days on trainings, which undoubtedly involves some personal sacrifices for the needs of the community and requires skillful time management between family and professional duties.

### *2.1. Voluntary services in earthquake conditions*

The July 24, 2016 earthquake was another unpredictable tragic event striking the heart of Italy, involving around 300 deaths and enormous material and economic losses in three regions: Abruzzo, Marche, Lazio and partly Umbria. The first columns of Civil Protection from the regions of Friuli-Venezia Giulia (Il Mattino di Padova, 2016) and Tuscany (Bini, 2016) headed ruined cities and towns within just a few minutes of the first shock. Fire brigades, troops with dogs specialized in searching for people, were the first units sent to the place of the tragedy. Hundreds of people buried under the rubble of their own homes were waiting for rescue. Movable Civil Protection Columns throughout the territory of Italy announced operational readiness and waited for proper dispositions. On the same day, the first volunteers of Civil Protection from 30 communes of the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia were sent to the areas affected by the tragedy<sup>3</sup>.

The Civil Protection Operational Center managed rescue operations and coordinated the expeditions of subsequent rescue services from all over Italy, while the Command and Control Directorate (DICOMAC) on August 28 chose the unit in Rieti for the command headquarters, which allowed for direct assessment of the

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<sup>3</sup> For the details see the website: <http://www.protezionecivile.fvg.it/it/emergenza-terremoto-centro-italia-24082016>

crisis situation and associated with it coordination of activities in the field of crisis management aimed at helping people, identifying damage to housing, artistic and cultural heritage and public buildings, as well as looking for alternative housing solutions and support for zootechnical activities<sup>4</sup>.

The earthquakes did not stop, seismographs recorded about 300 tremors of varied intensity per day. Feeling powerless residents of the affected areas personify natural seismic phenomena, calling them “Monster”, “Demon” or “The Terrible Beast” (La Stampa. Italia, 2016), which took everything from them. After more than three months from the first strong shocks, on October 30, earthquakes repeat with an increased strength of more than 7 on the Richter magnitude scale (Dusi, 2016), completely devastating the remnants of the saved homes and the hope of people waiting to return to them. The area of the seismic phenomenon is spreading to new towns, spared in the last catastrophe.

The rescue and protective action of volunteers lasting from August 24 expand, there occurs the need for new and strong hands to help. New volunteers are constantly arriving in the devastated territories; in the face of the winter, tent camps must be replaced with barracks; canteens, regardless of the “Beast’s” mood, must serve meals for up to 1,200 people three times a day. The help and protection of the inhabitants do not cease and will not cease even after the last earthquake, until the last person is ensured with home and a dignified life.

Volunteers are sent to perform rescue and protective actions according to the regional register of Coordination. Exchange of volunteers takes place every week. Volunteers from the Emilia-Romagna region work primarily in kitchens and canteens, although many of them, specialized in logistics and secretarial services in crisis situations, supervise the proper functioning of the tent cities.

The work of a volunteer during protective actions does not cease with the end of their shifts, as it is reported by volunteers of the Inter-municipal Group of Civil Protection Volunteers “Valconca” in the Province of Rimini. Four of this group were directed by the Provincial Management Board of the Civil Protection Volunteers to Caldarola. Elena, with the specialization in secretarial services in crisis situations and Guglielmo, with specialization in cooking, performed voluntary service during the second huge seismic shock that took place on October 30, 2016.

“The earthquakes were tremendously strong - says Elena - the school building standing on the hill, above the square where we set up the kitchen and canteen for 700 people, crumbled before my eyes. It looked as if the stones were thrown out by a strong catapult to the right, left and towards the canteen with unprecedented speed. The earthquake lasted over a minute. The stress was tremendously huge, but we could not show it. There were people with us who had lived in this horrible fear for months, but they were afraid too. The ground under our feet bounced, how huge the strength was you can understand, observing the area that fell by 20 cm. We, volunteers, felt the same as the residents, but mentally we were less prepared for it, they lived in a similar fear on a daily basis. But we know that we cannot *feed* fear, the more you show it, the more it affects others. It was necessary to keep calm, quickly identify fields and squares free of buildings, and to redirect people we took care of there” (personal communication, 2017, May 20).

After this earthquake, the kitchen and the canteen had to be moved, because the ground had fallen in many places and the last stump of the devastated school hung over the canteen. Guglielmo talked with excitement that everyone present, including the inhabitants of the tent town, participated in the dismantling of this facility.

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<sup>4</sup> For the details see the website: [http://www.protezionecivile.gov.it/jcms/it/terremoto\\_centro\\_italia\\_2016.wp](http://www.protezionecivile.gov.it/jcms/it/terremoto_centro_italia_2016.wp)

Although dismantling and setting up the kitchen and canteen in another place took about 12 hours, no one on that day was left without a meal, the kitchen was cooking in the open air and people were eating meals standing or on their knees (personal communication, 2017, May 20).

New quakes caused the necessity of new interventions, finding solutions and strengthening volunteer forces. Despite the designated working hours, the volunteers did not leave the place of their duty. Each pair of hands is always needed.

In the kitchen, the day begins at 5 a.m. and ends at 11 p.m. or even later. Meanwhile, the canteen with 700 seats serves meals for 1200 people three times a day, in two turns. Such an amount of meals requires good organization and coordination of work. “We were driven by adrenaline - says Marinella working in the kitchen and serving meals in the canteen - we had scheduled duties and working hours, but none of us was able to rest, anyway, what could be done in a tent? There was a lot of work and every help, even with washing lettuce, was very valuable. None of the volunteers knew each other, everybody came from a different organizational unit, but from the first moment we had a common language and we were harmonious. Such moments unit, it is a pity that usually such tragic moments, but the feeling that someone needs you, that you can give something, are something that evokes in you strength, which you do not even suspect yourself to have. Maybe it's hard to believe that by washing lettuce you're doing something really important. But you see it especially in the eyes of those people you are doing it for, or when they try to shake your hand, calling you an angel. It's really touching and gives you the strength to act. We went to bed at midnight and got up at quarter past four, in the evening it was enough to put your head on the pillow to fall asleep almost immediately. Just think that normally I suffer from insomnia ... Sometimes I think that our voluntary work in the kitchen was something that protected us from what was outside: gray dust floating constantly, the ubiquitous smell of crumbled cement, the sky covered with gray dust and stray, scared animals. We were only there for a week and we did not have to leave the campsite, we did not have to look at all these horrible things outside the tent city, and these people were there, they lived in tents from the very beginning” (personal communication, 2017, May 22).

Gray dust floating for weeks, covering the sky, is one of the unpleasant experiences volunteers talk about. Enzo, an electrician, who was responsible for electricity in the tent city, talked about the depressing, “lunar” atmosphere and about the people he met in the tent city “when you see their powerlessness, you feel that you want to give as much as you can. I was there as an electrician specialist, but many times I helped in other works, in everyday pulling up tent lines and even in cleaning toilets. In such situations, you have to do something, no matter what your profession is, you're only there for a week and looking for the best opportunity to spend it, because after coming back home it will be too late to make up for lost time. Well, you know that you'll be back home in a week or a day time. They, these people, will stay there. And that makes you not think about rest. When I left the place, I did not enjoy it at all, I even felt something like guilt, because I am leaving to enjoy my comforts, and they are still there” (personal communication, 2017, May 19).

Volunteers in their statements often referred to the metaphor of the “Beast” used by people who were “harmed” by it. Although, according to them, it is not the earthquake that is the “Beast”, but the fear that overpowers us in the face of natural seismic phenomena, primarily in cities whose architecture is several hundred years old and which suffer the lack of respect for construction standards, especially in cities where not old but new houses fall into rubble. Volunteers also willingly re-

ferred to the metaphor of angels they were endowed with by grateful residents: “This is what makes you not feel tired, you would like to give as much as you can. Although it's hard to say who gave more to whom. They, having nothing, were able to give us their own dignity, gratitude and affection, and yet we know how difficult it is nowadays”.

## 2.2. Preliminary assumptions of the methodological universe of the sociological research

Sociologists, accomplishing scientific projects in the area of pro-social attitudes, are aware of the inseparability of the theoretical-methodological-research thought complex within which they should maintain consistency. Since the length of the following article does not allow us for a detailed presentation of methodological assumptions, we will limit ourselves to the most important issues.

Fields of scientific interest are focused around the issue of agency and the subjectivity of volunteers offering the “gift of help” to people affected by the elemental forces. The title of the scientific project reads as follows: *Constructing and Legitimizing the (Pro)social Identity of Volunteers of the National Service of Civil Protection in Italy*.

The main goal of the planned research is formulated in the following way: What generative mechanisms (causative forces) activate, sustain and transform the voluntary gift of help in the volunteers of the Italian National Services of Civil Protection acting in favor of the public safety (the common good)? The research is to verify the thesis that (pro)social behaviors are a special type of structures fixing interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, they contribute to the strengthening of social capital in the situation of all kinds of threats. The generative mechanism that secures these social relations is the “gift of sacrifice”.

The study will use the author's narrative interview questionnaire divided into five basic parts: 1) The phase of starting an interview; 2) The phase of narration stimulation; 3) The phase of the narrator's presentation of the content; 4) The phase of asking questions; 5) The phase of ending the interview.

In the first part of the interview, favorable conditions will be created to strengthen the trust between the researcher and the respondent by building an encouraging atmosphere. The researcher sends honest thanks to the responder for taking part in the research, presents him-/herself and the represented scientific institution, determines the purpose of the research and ensures fulfillment of the postulates of ethical research (including the postulate of anonymity).

The autobiographical narratives of the Civil Protection volunteers are subjected to research, which is why in the second part of the interview the researcher explains the forms of speech to the interlocutor and asks the narrator to share their personal experience. The respondent may start their story from the beginning of their activity up to the day of the interview, describing the development of major events. At the end, the respondents are asked to express their remarks, observations, assessments or interpret their own experiences.

After these explanations, there follows the third phase of the interview – presentation of the content by the narrator. The spontaneous statement of the narrator is uninterrupted by the researcher's interventions. The interaction is maintained through non-verbal communication of the researcher expressing the approval and interest in the received content. After obtaining the respondent's consent, the interviews will be recorded on electronic recorders. After the narration, the researcher may (but he/she does not have to) ask additional questions. The researcher uses

prepared in the interview instrumentation preliminary, intermediate or final questions which should be formed in line with the recommendations of Kathy Charmaz (2009, pp. 46-47):

Preliminary questions:

- What conditions, circumstances or situations have affected your participation in volunteering?
- Tell me what happened [or how you came to ...]
- When have you have experienced / or have ever you experienced [or noticed ]
- If so, what was the experience? What did you think then? How did it happen that?
- What contributed to that..?
- What happened then and how would you describe / describe it?
- Intermediate questions:
- Tell me what did you think about and how did you feel about ...?
- What happened next?
- How has your attitude to..... changed? Has it changed?
- When you look back at ... have any other experiences stuck in your mind?
- What helps you deal with ...?
- Who is the most helpful person for you?
- Final questions:
- What do you think are the best ways to ....?
- Having such experience, what advice would you give to people who have experienced threats?
- Is there anything else that we should know to better understand the idea of volunteering?
- How does the experience associated with volunteering work affect you?
- Would you like to ask us something?

After answering additional questions by the respondent, the researcher ends the interview thanking the respondent for the time spent together and informing about other important to them issues.

The proposed narrative interview scheme leads to finding answers to fundamental issues sought after in the course of scientific investigations. These questions are of a fundamental, comprehensive and extremely multifaceted nature. Undoubtedly, they strive to “unveil” what is covered by everyday social practice carried out by volunteers.

Interpretive orientation seems to be an adequate method for generating or revealing the diversity of narrators’ experiences. This complexity of the human experience captures a number of possibilities for their demonstration. Respondents telling personal stories “sketch” their sociological portrait presenting it from their own perspective.

Bearing in mind the specific causality of social phenomena at the stage of verificationism and falsificationism, we will seek a realistic explanation of the emergent causal forces of the Italian Civil Protection volunteers’ involvement in the operation of this special social movement. Speaking of the causal forces of this social phenomenon, we mean the characteristics of elements constituting, conditioning, structuring, their sources, relational properties, reciprocity of interactions, their trajectory, possibilities and limitations or other important components.

At further stages of the research process, the collected materials will undergo further analysis to acquire scientific knowledge the authors are interested in. The respondents’ opinions will be analyzed in a transgressive manner, and they will be deconstructed in the hidden meanings system. We will look for what can lie behind the voluntary activity.

### 2.3. Preliminary results of pilot studies

In our research, we use the grounded theory method based on building the theory based on systematically collected empirical data (Glasser and Strauss, 1967; Konecki, 2008). In accordance with the principles of this methodology, material collected in the research process is analyzed using the material coding technique, consisting in naming and labeling elements of the observed reality (Konecki, 2000).

The preliminary analysis of the statements cited above, in spite of different areas of volunteer activities, different perceptions of the same circumstances and individual behaviors in a critical situation, which is an earthquake, has allowed us to show common elements important for the emergence of mechanisms activating the voluntary gift of sacrifice.

This thesis has been also verified in the pilot studies of fragments of interviews, in which the respondents answered the question: "Tell me, please, how did you become a volunteer?", examples of which are given below. Words written in bold font are those to which the authors wish to draw the reader's attention.

#### *Silvano, 58 years old*

It always annoyed me that people are waiting for the commune to do everything for them, even under their home ... shovel snow on the road ... cope with fallen branches of trees that can be pushed back or used as the fireplace wood. We all know that before the state offices undertake any action, it will take some time, and why should I live in a discomfort? The fact that I try to keep things in order around my house or in the neighborhood is not a remarkable feat, *I do it for myself*. Yes, of course, *others take advantage of my work*, but that's not the point, because *what would happen if everyone thought only about themselves? As long as I have healthy hands and feet, I can shovel snow, clean up these branches*. When a group of Civil Protection Volunteers was formed in our commune, I joined it because I knew that I would find *people there who think like me*.

#### *Elisa, 32 years old*

I joined the Civil Protection Service, because after work I had a lot of free time. Why did I choose Civil Protection? *Because I wanted to be useful*. Sure, I could find other forms of activities, but in my opinion, *helping others gives greater satisfaction than*, for example, some cooking courses. In addition, the Provincial Board of Volunteers for Civil Protection also organizes *courses* in Caritas canteen, so already at the stage of the course *you can help others*. Each volunteer can sign up and *mix business with pleasure*. In general Civil Protection is something unique.

#### *Thomas, 48 years old, Dane, living in Italy for 6 years, married to an Italian woman*

I moved to Italy in 2012, I didn't know the Civil Protection Volunteers, in Denmark this system is militarized, so when my wife suggested that we enroll for Civil Protection, I thought that a non-militarized organization can't be a serious one. My wife, however, enrolled and attended courses and classes. When she told me about this system I started to be interested in them. I began to accompany her to training and often stayed to observe. The more I watched what they were doing there, the greater was my need to become a volunteer. I also matured to such a decision thanks to *colleagues from the group* who always willingly answered my questions. A year ago, I completed a basic *course* and became a volunteer, then I realized that in the end *I can also give something to people who helped me to adapt here*. I can say that it was only then that I felt in Italy like at home.

*Francesca, 36 years old*

The decision about joining the Civil Protection volunteering was influenced by news broadcast on TV after the Amatrice earthquake in 2016. I couldn't find a place seeing other people crying after losing their loved ones, after losing everything. I felt uncomfortable watching these pictures sitting in a comfortable armchair. *I imagined how these people felt*, knowing they had nothing left. *I did not want to just look at and feel sorry for others, I wanted to do something*. I called the Provincial Board of Civil Protection Volunteers in Rimini, I thought that everyone can just come and help. They told me that I needed to be a volunteer. After three months I completed a basic course, I do not have any specializations yet, I only participate in training organized by our coordinators, as part of my volunteering activity *my group* takes part in forest monitoring, that's all ... But this year our group is starting a specialization in dog-assisted search for missing people. My dog has already passed the preliminary test, in our group, three other *colleagues* have dogs suitable for this type of training. The *course* lasts two years. I want to participate in it with my Balto, although I hope that there will be no need for any dog to look for anyone under the debris.

From the interviews quoted above, there emerge seemingly different motivations for volunteering: Silvano needs order and does not want to live in a discomfort, Elisa wanted to fill free time mixing business with pleasure, Thomas has been convinced by the observation of volunteers' training, and Francesca due to the strong empathy she felt towards the earthquake victims felt the need to help them. Despite the different situations and experiences of these people, their motivations all have a common foundation, which is readiness and the need to help others, generating mechanisms that activate specific actions to bestow others with their own selflessness.

In these statements there are many other common elements that meet the conditions for applying the grounded methodology, proposed by Barney Glaser in the first family of “Six C's” codes, including causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances and conditions (Glaser, 1978, pp. 73-75; Koniecki 2008, pp. 91-92). Already in the preliminary studies, volunteers' statements may reveal some of the elements of the “the Six's C” family: for example, various reasons, group, colleagues, courses related to future planning of volunteering activities. These factors and others selected from comprehensive research will be subjected to successive analysis with regard to other code families, such as “process” or “the family of degree”, to trace trajectories, chains, sequences, temporality, cyclicity, probabilities, opportunities, turning and critical points in constructing the identity of volunteers, building solidarity and other factors emerged during the research.

The research is to be conducted in several groups of the Italian Civil Protection volunteers in the province of Rimini, mainly in the Inter-communal Group of Civil Protection Volunteers (GIV) founded in the Valconca Union of Communes. The analysis will cover various phenomena, behaviors, statements obtained as a result of interviews, participant observation, external observation, as well as photographs and video recordings. The research will also use existing data, such as documentation from courses, training and interventions of the Civil Protection volunteers.

## Conclusion

The metaphor of gift remains the most adequate rhetoric describing the numerous relationships occurring between people. This is not only a matter of “rhetoric” of the gift associated with colloquial imaginations with possible staging. The theory of gift shaped in the course of studies on culture equips us with an extremely valuable concep-

tual apparatus that enables us to analyze and interpret the essence of the gift. When referring to the issues of bestowing someone, we are not dealing with something ordinary, although such an association also arises. It is also not an isolated act of behavior or individual compulsion that encourages people to do such and not other activities. Also, the regularity of these activities does not diminish its essence. Despite the fact that things we see in the course of our daily activities may seem to us too ordinary. In deepening its essence, one should refer to much more complex forces covered by everyday superficiality or its non-obvious substrates.

Considering the broadly understood issues related to social reproduction, we may observe that one of the most important binders is the "gift of help" and all social relations preserving these gifts. This gift is all the more valuable because it is offered in special situational conditions. We are talking here about environment conditions, the (in)security determined by the following states of safety-risk-crisis-threat-danger (Maciejewski, 2014, p. 204), developed in the theoretical concept of the sociology of dispositional groups. These states cannot be seen as dually or dyadically oppositional. On the contrary, these conditions polarize or even hybridize in an extremely complex way. The destructure process taking place in the (in)security environment is regulated by specific mechanisms, driving them destructive forces. Only apparently they may seem to be incompatible or contradictory to each other, and experiencing them seems almost inevitable.

In the situation of danger of any kind, people in need of help expect it from specialized formations, capable of providing help in an organized manner. One of such social structures offering help and support in difficult circumstances are volunteer groups operating in the mode of emergency availability. People struggling with the consequences of such circumstances obtain a special gift of help from volunteers. Every volunteer, as a volunteer or social worker, consciously, free of charge and voluntarily works for the benefit of those in need. These attributes - voluntary and no-payment character of the help - are constitutive features of volunteering. Volunteering carried out in the situation of the environment of (in)security is a special type of rescue used in times of natural disasters or random accidents. Although assistance of volunteers is provided ad hoc, it is indispensable to recreate damaged social structures. Their involvement through the personal transmission of the gift of help triggers an amazing causative power.

The rhetoric of the gift of help or the rhetoric of the gift of sacrifice shows us the beauty and blessings of this sacrifice. It often goes beyond institutionalized, organized in a determined way space and becomes something that exceeds the institutional limitations out of the goodness of heart.

The research results of the implemented project will certainly contribute to a deeper understanding of volunteer activities. It is especially important in the view of our thesis saying that the (pro)social behavior is a special type of structures fixing interpersonal relationships. Moreover, it contributes to the strengthening of social capital in the situation of all type of threats. The generative mechanism that fixes these social relations is the "gift of sacrifice" which may be verified by the "emerging" responses of the respondents.

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