

The Impact of Religion in University on Young University Students an Ethnographic Inquiry

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Abstract: The existing literature reveals that there are two main reasons explaining why youth practice religion in universities: to fulfill psychological well-being and to gain life satisfaction. However, these studies failed to examine how religion impacts on youth in university contexts. Besides, the research studies were largely based on empirical data gathered from limited samples, thus, the context-specific differences and diversity of human actions were not taken into consideration. Given this scenario, this study explores the motivations of young university students to participate in the activities of the religion based organizations in universities. The study further examined two sub-questions in order to understand why young university students choose religious associations in the university; and to gain insights into the specific youth-related benefits that university students expect to enjoy as members of the those religious groups.

Keywords: Religion, Youth, University, Social Capital, Empowerment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Religion places an immense value on human life. This is not an exception for youth, studying in universities in today's world. Cusack argues that the growth of transnational religions and the emergence of new religious alternatives has resulted in young university students joining new religious organizations [1]. Despite the sociological importance of this issue, little attention has been paid to investigating the religious involvement of young students in universities. To address this gap, this ethnographic research explored the motivations of young university students to participate in the activities of religious associations in the university context.

Firstly, the study examines the impact of religion on university students from a youth perspective. In doing so, the study aims to investigate the reasons why young university students associate with religion in universities. The study also contributes to existing knowledge of social capital and empowerment by applying these theoretical frameworks to youth religious practices in universities. By expanding the current understanding of how the cultural settings of an organization influence its outcome, the study explores the cultural elements of religious organizations of universities and their impact on the members.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The study was carried out by observing activities and interviewing members of the Buddhist Society of University of Queensland (UQBUDS), Campus Evangelism Movement (CEM), Campus Christian Movement (CCM), Buddhist Education Society (UQ BEST) and Muslim Students Association (MSA) in the University of Queensland, Australia. The ethnographic methodology used in the study, sought to provide unique insights into the context of young students at UQ. Unlike the previous studies carried out on this theme, the study explored diverse culture and real life phenomena of the UQ students through participant observations and unstructured interviews.

Theoretical Insights:

The studies that investigate the impact of religion on young university students focus on three main themes in the literature: why youth practice religion in universities (Frankel & Hewitt 1994; Proctor 2002; Jaschik 1994; Temkin &

Evans, 1998; Laurence & Johnson, 2012), how religious based associations create social capital (Cusack 2011; Cnaan, Gelles & Sinha 2004; Wood 1999; Tsai & Ghoshal 1998) and dimensions of empowerment within religious associations (Hopkins, 2007; Frankel & Hewitt, 1994; Jennings et al., 2006)

Literature shows that there are two main reasons why youth practice religion in universities. This include to fulfill psychological well-being (emotional) and to gain life satisfaction [2]. In elaborating on the later, Jaschik (1994), Temkin & Evans (1998), Laurence & Johnson (2012) outline three key reasons for why youth participate in religious associations in universities. Firstly, the religious groups in universities provide a safer environment to practice religion than outside [3]. Secondly, these religious platforms bring together students with similar beliefs and values [4]. The third aspect is that students get easy access to a range of social gatherings and events through the networking developed in these spaces [5]. Thus, religious associations enable young students to stay calm while increasing interactions with peer students, which, in turn, builds social capital.

How social capital is formed within religiously organized associations in universities is discussed in relation to the three dimensions of social capital: structural, relational and cognitive dimensions. The structural dimension of social capital entails social interaction with other persons or groups and how explains these interactions lead to a collective course of action . Wood shows that the relational dimension describes opportunities created with trust, and relationships among membership that are based on a shared vision and objectives [6]. He further explains that 'a shared vision' is constructed through culture, and also 'framing issues' within organizations attract potential participants through shared cultural elements such as symbols, images, beliefs and language. On the other hand, the cognitive dimension of social capital involves a set of values and norms that are respected on a mutually understood platform [7]. One common agreement among Todd (2012), Wood (1999) and Perks & Hann (2011) is that religious institutional settings in universities harness social capital through social networking, presenting new opportunities and empowering their members.

The way in which religious settings empower youth has been discussed in three dimensions. Youth empowerment is a social action process that can happen at multiple levels: individual, family, organizational and community level [8]. It is a process best understood as occurring on a continuum, which focuses on change at the individual level (Atomistic Individual Empowerment) and collective level (Political Empowerment) [9] . By introducing the Critical Youth Empowerment model (CYE), Jennings and others (2006) illustrate four elements of youth empowerment: equitable power-sharing among youth, engagement in critical reflections, participation in socio-political processes to effect change, and integrated community level empowerment [10].

However, the above studies have a number of limitations. Mainly, the studies were conducted by using quantitative research methods (empirical data) gathered from very limited samples. Therefore, the contextual differences and diversity of human actions were not taken into consideration. On the other hand, the studies were greatly confined to Christian church based organizations and universities in the USA and Canada, therefore, Buddhism, Islam and Confucianism, which are vibrant religions in many universities, have not been taken into account. Most significantly, none of the studies have looked at the religion and universities from a youth perspective, therefore, youth religious practices in universities have not been explored to date.

3. DISCUSSION

Expanding Social Networking:

During the interviews, the members explained to me that they have developed a social network of friends through the activities of the religious based associations. The members came to know each other after joining the group and eventually they were able to establish strong relationships with each other. The president of Campus Evangelism Movement mentioned that: 'I am glad that I joined the group. I now have more close friends than before'. This shows that the regular meetings and other activities of the religious associations have created a nexus point for connection and organizational activity. Thus, these regular events provide a conducive environment for interactions and networking to take place. Tseng and Seidman argue that settings are important as they create places for social processes to occur. In these processes, interpersonal relationships are formed and bridging links established [11].

Bridging Links, Bonding & Social Capital:

The members repeatedly mentioned to me that the activities (settings) that are organized by the respective associations, aided in establishing interpersonal relationships, bridging links and facilitating networking among its members. According

to Todd, the interactions and networking build up over time create social capital [12]. Social capital is often discussed in terms of bonding and bridging, where increased opportunities and resources are created. Furthermore, social capital facilitates co-operation and mutually beneficial relations in communities, thus, it increases access to information, improve skill sets and enhances power [13]. During my interviews, the members reiterated the fact that getting to know the other members of the each associations had brought a number of positive benefits. One benefit was the fact that they were not alone in the university anymore. UQ students' participation in the activities of the religious associations, brought new friends, thus, they felt connected. The interviewee of the Buddhist Society explained that: 'one reason I joined the UQBUDS is to avoid being alone', 'now I feel super cool as I don't get that dull feeling anymore'.

This establishing interpersonal relationships and bridging links were much evident during my observations too. I found that the activities of the Campus Christian Movement largely contributed to expanding interactions among members. The activities of one event included introducing each other followed by a detailed introduction of new members that had joined on that particular day. The facilitator took extra effort to make sure that the new members were not left behind. During the breaks, all were engaged in casual conversations with each other. Laughs, jokes and holding hands were visible while some continued to discuss complex theologies of the religion. Each member utilized the time to link with each other; be it around a personal issue or educational; and they were building contacts and exchanging information (social network). Todd (2012) brings the theoretical framework of social network and argues that interactions of each unit (of the network) converge to become a social structure of mutual interdependence. However, he argues that the unit of a social network is less useful than the relationship between and within the units in relation to the connectivity of the network. However, when considering the social network developed among the members of the Campus Christian Movement, the second assertion of Todd does not appear to relate this specific context as each member (unit) plays a crucial role in shaping the structure of the organization.

Shared Cultural Elements Build Mutual Trust:

My observations also revealed that the environment of the room, the language used and behavior patterns of the members were helpful for the members to build rapport and trust with each other. During the observation of UQBUDS, everyone had a book with an image of the Lord Buddha. All the members read out the narratives and discussed the philosophy of Buddhism. All used very friendly language with somewhat a low tone. All sat on the floor with bare feet. This is reflected in the writings of Snow and Benford (1992), where they have explained how culture matters within social associations. According to them, the actors of social organizations use culture to frame issues to attract potential participants. Furthermore, religious language and imaginary provide a salient set of tools for framing issues [14]. They further rely on a 'cultural strategy' which draws on cultural elements of the participants of an organization and creates an organizational cultural base. Thus, I noticed that, the friendly language, common history of the same religion, common beliefs of Buddhism, all aided to construct 'framing issues' and led to stronger bonding and trust among the members the UQBUDS.

Diversity is Strength:

The interviewees described that the members of these associations were from different backgrounds and that this was a strength. One interviewee stated that the Campus Christian Movement 'is actually a melting point of various ethnicities, cultures, degrees (disciplines)'. According to the President, the Christian Movement represents members from 11 countries, 14 languages, 8 study programmes and members from all degree categories (Bachelor, Masters and PhD). Moreover, Campus Evangelism Movement brings together rich diverse group with a huge potential of cross-exchange of learning. Adding to this diversity, the UQBUDS takes up a range of different topics at each learning sessions which are not necessarily related to Buddhism. Its president stated that: 'though we have a topic for each session, we are open about it', 'we talk Buddhism, exams, food and traveling...all like it'. During the observations, I noticed that in addition to the topics on Buddhism, the members talked about their experiences in Australia, how to apply for a child-rebate and holiday plans for the summer break. This resonates with the three dimensions that King and Furrow (2004) have outlined in relation to social capital. The structural dimension of social capital entails, diverse social interaction with others and leads to a common understanding of one another. This increases opportunities and strengthen trust and relationship among the membership.

Open Membership Broadens Networking:

The open membership criteria and the diversity of the scope of the religious clubs in the university has attracted a considerable number of young students. The membership of all associations in the university is open to non-university

students who share a similar vision as well. One Interviewee mentioned that: ‘[] we are not a radical religious group. We are open for any discussion’. This has resulted in a diverse membership as they have expanded their social interactions to a broader group of people. This also has resulted in these associations organizing a variety of activities, which enable its members to interact with a large number of students. This complements the findings of Jaschik (1994) and Temkin & Evans (1998) on why youth associate with religion in universities. They found that religious groups in universities provide a safer environment for students to practice religion than religious spaces available outside the campuses. Secondly, these religious platforms bring together students with similar beliefs and values. The third aspect is students get easy access to a range of social gatherings and events through the networking developed in these spaces. Not only do students think that these associations inspire them to engage in volunteer work for the benefit of the community at large, but also they open up opportunities in which the faith-based principles taught by their respective religions can be translated into worthy causes of actions.

Empowerment: Leadership skills and planning skills:

Youth empowerment is a social action process that can happen at multiple levels: individual, family, organizational and community level . It is also a process which focuses on change at the individual level (Atomistic Individual Empowerment) and at the collective level (Political Empowerment) . In this light, the interviews showed that one reason for university students to participate in its activities is that it provides a space for them to develop their skills and competencies. As a student association, the UQBEST facilitates various common activities for its members, fulfills Buddhism-based learning objectives and organizes networking events. These require a lot of planning, leadership skills and management techniques. The President of the UQBEST, mentioned that: ‘this is a demanding task, but I see, I am a better planner than before’.

According to the interviewees, these skills help, not only for their professional career after the studies, but day-to-day life as well. Time management, division of labour and responsibility for multiple tasks at the same time were the some of the crucial skills mentioned during the interviews. As Hopkins (2007) points out, empowerment can occur at multiple levels: individual, family and organizational levels. The findings of Cusack (2011), Cnaan, Gelles, & Sinha (2004), Wood (1999) that demonstrate why youth associate with religious organizations in universities, also show similar conclusions. For example, Cusack (2011) points out that religion, places youth in a socialization process. As established by Wood (1999), religion assists the younger generation to mobilize resources of their contacts and promote active participation of community groups. Thus, the skills developed through the activities of the religion based societies have increased the skills and competencies of young university students.

Empowerment – Critical Thinking & Analytical Competencies:

Interviews revealed that the activities of these associations have enhanced his capacity to be critical, analytical and reflective. For instance, the readings of the Lord Buddha have provided the members with an opportunity to step-back and review their work in the past, present and future of the UQBUDS. Further, Muslim Students Association often discusses topics related to critical reflections, thus, the ability to analyze with evidence is practiced rather than simply accepting someone’s personal reasoning. At the same time being analytical, enhances the members’ capacity to solve problems effectively and to view complex issues with maturity. In their discussions of the Critical Youth Empowerment model (CYE) Jennings and others (2006) define empowerment in four dimensions: equitable power sharing, engagement in critical reflections, participation in socio-political processes to effect change and integrated community level empowerment. According to CYE model, the ability of critical reflection is nurtured in a context where youth engage in activities that create change and reflect their actions .

During the observation period, I became aware that the members spent considerable time discussing the teaching of respective religions on critical analysis and self-reflections. Not only the words they used during the discussions, but the tone, emphasis and mode of interactions demonstrated their interest in generating a solid understanding of this subject. Wood (1999) explains that the cultural dynamics within the organization construct a culture, shared by its constituents. In doing so it establishes of ‘shared cultural elements’ such as assumptions, perceptions of the world, symbols, figures, rituals, narratives and concepts that help them to interpret and act in the world. These shared cultural elements increase the likelihood of a group generating a shared meaning of their actions. The following diagram (Durkheimian Process) shows the process visually.

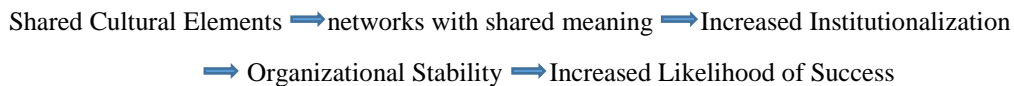


Figure 1. Institutionalization of Culture Elements Leading to Success Source: (Wood 1999 p. 314)

As shown in the diagram, common cultural elements such as shared values, beliefs, assumptions and perceptions lead to a shared meaning among members and nurtures common understanding. This shared vision, as well as beliefs, symbols and language have generated a common set of conduct among the members of the religious groups, as they have developed the skills of critical thinking and reflection through their activities.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of the study demonstrated that when young students come together to practice their religion, it creates an environment conducive to the development of mutual trust and help. The findings revealed that the religion based associations in universities, provide opportunities for young students to expand social networking. The activities of those societies were found to aid in establishing interpersonal relationships and create bridging links among its members. It was found that social networking and interactions that develop over time within the religious associations, build social capital among young students. Though the contemporary understanding of social capital suggested by Wood (1999) captures these dimensions, the theoretical framework put forward by Todd (2012) on social networking seems inadequate when reflecting on these findings. Nevertheless, the diversity of the members and its open membership criteria have strengthened the trust among young members and increased opportunities for broader networking both within and outside the organizations.

Furthermore, findings from the study demonstrated that the religious clubs assist in youth empowerment both in the professional and individual spheres. During activities, the students are exposed to multiple tasks, in which skills in time management, planning and division of labour are crucial. In addition to this, students' engaging with the religious groups in the campus, develop critical, analytical and reflective thinking.

All throughout the study, it was observed that the cultural elements play a decisive role. Cultural strategy draws cultural elements of the participants of an organization and creates an organizational cultural base. The friendly language, common history of the same religion and common beliefs construct a shared vision that leads to stronger bonding and trust among the members. Likewise, the shared vision, beliefs, symbols and language generated a common set of conduct among the members.

Nonetheless, the study is bound by a few limitations. The study was a medium scale qualitative research project, hence, interviews and observations were performed within a very short period of time. Therefore, the opinions of the interviewed members did not represent the position of all of the members of the respective associations. The observations were conducted at the available events organized by those associations, leaving no option to select activities that would have been more suitable to the research problem. Furthermore, the study was carried out, targeting five different religious associations, the context and circumstances in other religious settings could produce different findings.

Yet, beyond its congregations, sacred histories and sermons, religion creates a framework in which youth can foster partnerships and increase cooperation with one another. The needs of young university students with regard to religion are unique and different from the needs of other age groups. While acknowledging that these distinct youth aspirations should be reflected in policy planning, a comprehensive study that examines the contexts of other religions is required.

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