

Researching voluntary commitment after confirmation and long-term effects of confirmation work

Perspectives from Germany

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1. Research topics and questions

The title of this chapter refers not only to one topic but actually contains two topics which are of special interest in terms of researching non-formal religious education, although in different respects: voluntary commitment on the one hand and long-term effects of non-formal religious education on the other. Moreover, it also refers to the question of researching these two topics and to the methodological challenges which arise in this context.

Concerning the first topic – voluntary commitment in general –, there clearly has been a new appreciation of this kind of commitment in many countries during the last years or even decades (cf. for example, BMFSFJ 2016; Arnesen et al. 2013; Hustinx et al. 2015). The so-called refugee crisis of the year 2015 probably can be seen as exemplary in this respect. Among others in Germany, it would have been impossible to welcome the many refugees without the help of the numerous volunteers who became active in this situation. Voluntary work has therefore been appreciated as indispensable for a humane society and, in addition to this, as part and parcel of a strong civil society which, in turn, is interpreted as a presupposition for flourishing democracies. Moreover, and even more important in the context of education, there has been something like a process of discovering the special role of young volunteers (cf. from different countries Ilg et al. 2018; Bundesministerium 2015; Freitag et al. 2016; Center For Frivilligt Socialt Arbejde 2014). To again use Germany as an example, young people between the ages of 14 and 19 years are the group in society with the highest percentage of volunteers (cf. Ilg et al. 2018, 17–26). At the same time, however, the traditional assumption that volunteers typically are people in early retirement still seems to dominate public opinion, in society at large as well as in the church. Consequently, giving more attention to young volunteers is of special interest in several respects, especially for doing justice to the young people whose commitment deserves much more attention and appreciation.

Another context for discovering the importance of young volunteers was the recent research on confirmation work in Europe. Between 2007 and 2015 two major research projects on confirmation work were carried out in nine European countries, with questionnaires for the confirmands, for the ministers as well as for the volunteers who are active in this field (cf. Schweitzer et al. 2010 and 2015; cf. Simojoki in this volume). In many of the countries participating in these research projects,

young volunteers play an important role for confirmation work. In Germany alone, there are 62000 volunteers per year involved in confirmation work, many of them still in their adolescence. Finland, however, is the country with the longest tradition of having teams of young volunteers as part of confirmation work, and the percentage of young people being trained as young leaders after their confirmation is even higher than in Germany (cf. Niemelä and Porkka 2015).

Young people's commitment to voluntary work is related to non-formal religious education in a number of ways. Concerning volunteers in confirmation work, their voluntary commitment is part of a non-formal educational program offered by the church. In this sense, the volunteers are acting as religious educators in the non-formal sector, although their tasks are not always explicitly related to what traditionally is seen as religious education but often are more practical, for example, planning and organising games with the confirmands. Moreover, the work carried out by the volunteers also implies educational experiences related to the volunteers themselves (cf. Schweitzer et al. 2016). As described below, the volunteers express that, through their commitment, they have acquired new skills and competences and they often report that they have matured in a number of important respects due to their voluntary commitment, for example, concerning leadership skills. Consequently, it makes sense to view voluntary work as non-formal religious education. Calling it "religious" is at least justified in the context of the church where faith-related motives and questions play an implicit and often even explicit role which is not to say that religious aspects do not also play a role in other contexts of voluntary work and commitment.

The second research question concerns possible long-term effects of non-formal religious education, in this case of confirmation work. Increasingly, the question of long-term effects is raised by church leaders who are concerned about losing members and who are wondering how the educational programs offered by the church could be used for stabilising church membership. Yet the question of long-term effects is also of interest in terms of general educational research because so little is known about such effects in the area of non-formal education. Can the sometimes enthusiastic reports about educational effects of non-formal education be backed by empirical evidence?

Both research topics raise complex methodological issues. By definition, voluntary work is characterised by its low degrees of institutionalization and regulation. Consequently, research procedures must be suitable and sensitive to different forms of voluntary commitment and their organizational contexts which distinguishes this research from studies on Religious Education at school. Moreover, reaching a sample of respondents is much more demanding than in school-type settings where pupils can be reached in their classrooms. In most cases, the volunteers are not organised in well-defined groups or formal associations that can be used for contacting them but must be identified as individuals.

Asking about long-term effects of confirmation work raises additional questions. It is always difficult to clearly distinguish effects of confirmation work from other

possible influences, for example, from the family or from Religious Education at school. With long-term approaches, it becomes even more difficult to control such additional influences – a difficulty which increases over time since possible influences and respective effects may multiply. The longer the time span in question, the more other influences can make themselves felt. This is the main reason for the need for multiple perspectives and research approaches in this case as well as for the importance of statistical approaches controlling for different influences instead of relying on simple correlations.

Another question refers to how long-term effects can be identified. In other words, what are the indicators of such effects and what are the reasons for choosing these indicators? In the studies which form the basis of this chapter, a number of indicators of long-term effects of confirmation work were identified (cf. especially Ilg et al. 2018): (1) voluntary commitment after confirmation, (2) the relationship to the church, (3) the relationship to the Christian faith. It would, of course, be possible to use different or additional indicators but these three can be considered broad enough for capturing different orientations and attitudes of young people. Moreover, a number of research designs were developed with the idea that making use of a number of approaches could also contribute to securing valid results.

It must also be mentioned at this point that the German studies on which this chapter draws in the first place, were inspired by the work of Kati Tervo-Niemelä and Jouko Porkka in Finland (cf. Niemelä 2008; Niemelä and Porkka 2015 with additional references). These colleagues can be considered true pioneers in researching voluntary work in the context of confirmation work as well as long-term effects of confirmation work.

2. Research designs

Given the complex nature of the research questions relating to both voluntary commitment and long-term effects of non-formal religious education as well as the methodological difficulties ensuing from this, the present chapter draws not only on a single study but on five related studies which were conducted in Germany. These studies approach the two research topics from different perspectives. In brief, these studies can be described in the following manner:

1. A qualitative study with young volunteers in confirmation work at the age of 16 to 18 years in a number of selected locations in different regions in Germany (group interviews; N=48) (Schweitzer et al. 2016, 122–254). The aim of this study was to find out in depth about the motives and experiences of this particular group of volunteers who, after their own confirmation, continued as young leaders in this field. The qualitative approach allows for contextual and individualised insights into the biographies of the volunteers and the experiences connected to them.

2. A qualitative study with adolescents and young adults – volunteers as well as non-volunteers at the age of 18 to 26 years in a number of selected locations in different regions in Germany (individual interviews; N=30) (Ilg et al. 2018, 91–154). The study had its focus on subjective views of long-term effects of confirmation work and of its meaning for motivating young people for voluntary commitment. Like with the first study, this investigation also had a focus on contextual insights.
3. A quantitative-representative study with 18- to 26-year-olds (N=2714; representative for the whole age group and with an additional sub-sample of Protestant volunteers) (Ilg et al. 2018, 31–90). The study was designed such that comparisons between different groups in society (especially Protestants, Roman Catholics, non-affiliated respondents who together comprise more than 80% of the population in Germany) would be possible. Since only Protestants take part in confirmation work, this design allows for clear comparisons of young people with and without the respective experience. In this case, the emphasis had to be on representative results in order to make the comparisons possible methodologically.
4. A quantitative study with a questionnaire for former confirmands two years after their confirmation (N=1937; non-representative longitudinal data) (Schweitzer et al. 2016, 34–121). This study was aimed at long-term effects mostly in terms of attitudes towards the Christian faith and the church. It only included a small number of volunteers but the responses of the non-volunteers concerning their reasons for not volunteering have a broader base in this study. The special value of this approach lies in the insights based on truly longitudinal results which are quite rare in the context of research on youth and religion.
5. A quantitative study with a questionnaire for former confirmands four years after their confirmation (N=509; non-representative longitudinal data) (Ilg et al. 2018, 155–228). The aims of this study were identical with those of study 4. In addition, the results are of special interest because of the relatively long time-span they cover (2012, the beginning of the confirmation time of these respondents, to 2017). Again the main interest of this approach is in truly longitudinal results.

The different samples of these studies imply that results have become available for both, volunteers and non-volunteers which allows for interesting comparisons. Moreover, the studies include a focus on volunteers in confirmation work but also on other fields within and without the church.

Together the results from these different studies promise a somewhat robust basis for gaining insights into the situation and the presuppositions of volunteerism in adolescence and young adulthood as well as the long-term effects of confirmation work. It should be emphasized, however, that these studies were the first of their kind which excludes, among others, cross-references to earlier results for comparative evaluation, and that the results certainly do not cover all pertinent questions (for further discussion of this limitation see below, pp. 261–263). In the long run,

if additional studies of this kind should become available (which would, of course, be most desirable) more comprehensive interpretations will become possible.

Also, the relationship between the different studies deserves special considerations. It must be clear from the beginning that the results from the different studies cannot just be combined in a direct manner – like pieces of a puzzle which yield a complete picture. Instead, the different studies are based on different methodologies and work with different samples. However, it makes sense to consider these studies as different spotlights shedding light on certain aspects which show up in all or at least in some of the studies. Another way of putting it would be that the studies allow for a conversation between the different results. In this sense, both is possible that results can be seen as mutually confirming certain interpretations and views but also as raising additional questions.

3. Selected results

In the following, the focus will be on voluntary commitment as long-term effect of confirmation work because this commitment can be viewed as a core indicator of such effects. This focus implies, however, that other important perspectives will not be pursued here to the same degree, for example, the experiences of being a volunteer which were also investigated in the different studies, with interesting results that can only be briefly mentioned here (for these results see Schweitzer et al. 2015). Moreover, other long-term effects of confirmation work concerning the relationship to church and faith will also not be presented (for results and discussions of these effects see Ilg et al. 2018). This does not mean that these aspects are less important. Yet in terms of the present discussion with its focus on methodological questions it is sufficient to concentrate on the example of voluntary commitment. In many ways, the results and methodological considerations presented in this chapter are parallel to those concerning attitudes towards the church and the Christian faith.

The studies used both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Since the different methodologies also lead to different results, they will be presented separately before discussing them in connection to each other.

Selected quantitative results

The guiding question concerning young people becoming volunteers after their confirmation was related to the predictors for this decision. A number of such predictors could be identified in the different studies, among others, based on regression analysis.

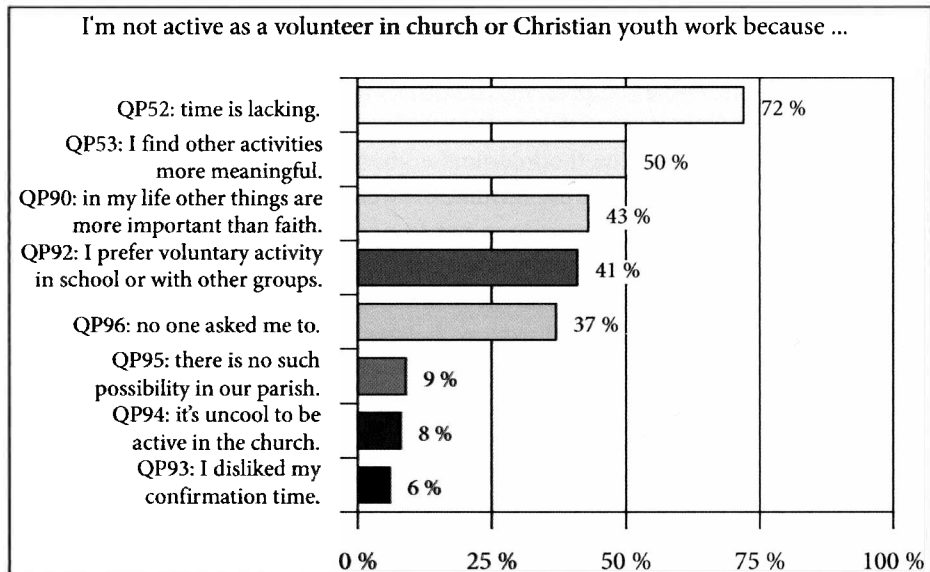
In general, experiences during confirmation time turned out to be a strong predictor of voluntary commitment after confirmation. The confirmands who were satisfied with their confirmation time were clearly more likely to become volunteers

after their confirmation than those who were not satisfied with their confirmation time. This general result could be specified in a number of concrete respects concerning good experiences with confirmation work. Yet one element of confirmation work turned out to be of special importance: the chance to try out voluntary work (cf. Schweitzer et al. 2016, 91–108). In many cases, although not in all parishes in Germany, the confirmands have the opportunity to work as volunteers in one or several fields of their choice during confirmation time. Often they can do so for limited periods of time. It seems that this experience has a powerful effect on young people's interest in becoming a volunteer on a more long-term basis after confirmation.

From a different perspective, the answers of those who did not become volunteers after their confirmation, also shed light on the presuppositions for becoming a volunteer. Among others they show the need for being asked and being invited personally to become involved with some kind of voluntary activity. Figure 1 presents the reasons for not volunteering in church or Christian youth work indicated by the former confirmands two years after their confirmation.

According to these responses, lacking time seems to be the most important obstacle for becoming a volunteer. Given the increasingly long hours adolescents in Germany have to spend in school this explanation appears quite plausible. Yet the data indicate that competing interests also play a role for the young people, be it in

Figure 1: Reasons for not being active as a volunteer



N = 1529-1544; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable).

From: Schweitzer et al. 2017, 137

terms of the choice of the field where they want to be involved or be it in terms of their religious orientations. In this case, it must be acknowledged that naturally, not everyone is equally interested in the Christian faith.

However, the fact that 37% of the respondents say that they have not been asked to become a volunteer is more troublesome. It raises the question if there is a selective process involved through which only certain people are approached while others are not taken into consideration from the beginning. Most likely, ministers or other workers only approach those adolescents who appear to be motivated and who, because of their personal presuppositions, present themselves as potentially good voluntary workers. Those adolescents who appear to be more difficult to handle and less promising are then left out. Further analysis of background data shows that it is the adolescents who are more distant from the church and who have not experienced stronger forms of religious socialization during childhood, who are the least likely to become volunteers. Consequently, the selective process involved in approaching or not approaching young people as potential volunteers works against giving more distanced adolescents a chance for new experiences with the church. It is easy to see that this result should be alarming to the ministers and workers responsible for organising voluntary work and for giving access to this kind of commitment. It seems that chances for attracting more young people as volunteers are missed, especially with those who could benefit most from more involvement with the church which would be a new experience for them.

Concerning the motivation for being a volunteer, the quantitative study with the 18 to 26 years old adolescents and young adults (representative for the whole age group) yields interesting results. Table 1 presents the results for Protestant respondents.

Table 1: Motivation for being a volunteer

Reasons for voluntary commitment (18 to 26 years old Protestant respondents, N=1449–1466)

I am active as a volunteer because, ...

EP32: it is fun	83%
EP66: I like doing things with other people	76%
EP67: I want to contribute to a better society	77%
EP69: I want to learn something which will be of use to me in later life	69%
EP73: doing something for others is part of my faith	49%
EP91: it looks good on my CV	45%

adapted from Ilg et al. (2018), 46.

The response “because it is fun” receives by far the strongest approval. This response which is familiar from other studies should not be understood to mean that young volunteers are only interested in having fun. It would be mistaken to think of today’s adolescents only in terms of a hedonistic so-called “fun generation”. Instead

the results show that for the adolescents and young adults, serious commitment and having fun are not opposites but must, in fact, go together for them.

Similarly, the next two items with high approval rates indicate that the motive of “being with other people” and “to contribute to a better society” belong together in the eyes of the young people. Again, positive personal experiences are important but they clearly go hand in hand with the commitment to others and to the common good of society. Opposed to this, other motives which could be called extrinsic (“it looks good on my CV”) are present but play a smaller role than other motivations. This is also true, however, for explicit connections to the Christian faith (“doing something for others is part of my faith”). It seems that this motive does not fit with ways in which many of the young volunteers perceive themselves, although it should not be overlooked that half of the respondents answer this question affirmatively. Many young people probably have different ways of seeing themselves and the connection between faith and action may well turn out to be a typical adult interpretation.

The representative study also showed that early familiarity with voluntary work is another strong predictor of later commitment (cf. Ilg et al. 2018, 35–40). Adolescents and young adults with parents who were active as volunteers when their children were young, are clearly more likely to become volunteers themselves when they are old enough. That this familiarity occurs more often with Protestants in Germany than, for example, with people without religious affiliation explains why German Protestants are among the most active groups in the field of voluntary work. Voluntary commitment is, as it were, hereditary. The influence of experiences during childhood can be interpreted as an asset of Protestantism. At the same time, however, the issue of selective processes and of the exclusion of potential young volunteers repeats itself in this respect. It seems to be easier to motivate young people as volunteers if they are already familiar with voluntary work and have been convinced of its importance from early on. Ministers and other workers will probably be intuitively thinking of these adolescents first when they are looking for new candidates for a certain task. Yet just following this apparently well-founded intuition will not lead them to those more distanced adolescents who might also be willing to become volunteers, provided that they are asked. Since they have not been familiarized with the benefits of volunteerism by their parents, it is most likely harder to motivate them – and it may also be more demanding for the ministers to work with them. Yet there would be a clear chance to attract new people to this field of work, and voluntary commitment should not be restricted to those who have a strongly Christian background from the beginning and whose parents were able to pass on their experiences as volunteers.

In sum, according to the results from the different studies, there are indeed long-term influences from childhood as well as more recent effects related to confirmation work and to being able to try out voluntary work during confirmation time. The influences from the family remain important but so are experiences from later educational programs offered by the Protestant church. Results from other stud-

ies most of all carried out in Finland even indicate that there is a point at which the influence of voluntary commitment outweighs the effects from childhood socialization. This point, however, is only reached after several years of being a volunteer in confirmation work (Porkka and Tervo-Niemelä 2017, 178–179) – an interesting development which, in the future, should also be investigated in Germany. Such a study would require a design which allows for comparisons between different groups of young volunteers, for example, one-time volunteers on the one hand and volunteers who have continued their commitment over several years on the other.

Selected qualitative results

The qualitative results provided by the studies presented here are also of special interest concerning the question of how young people become volunteers (cf. especially Schweitzer et al. 2016, 122–254; Ilg et al. 2018, 91–154). They allow for more detailed and multi-faceted insights into the sometimes complex processes involved in terms of the individual biographies and the views described by the respondents. This is the natural strength of qualitative approaches which, in this sense, must complement the quantitative approaches with their more general and, in part, representative results.

In many cases, the qualitative results confirm that experiences during confirmation time can indeed be an important starting point for voluntary commitment. To quote one of the respondents who, looking back to the time of confirmation, describes the effects of encountering volunteers (Ilg et al. 2018, 98):

“The [volunteers] go there and somehow they do it for a week during vacation time. I want to do this as well. The other children [who come] after me also deserve this, so to speak. This was the beginning. Everything that has happened since in the last 10 years, I can say, had its base in having experienced [voluntary] work” (23-year-old female interviewee)

Yet the results also show that viewing confirmation work as a starting point should not be understood in the sense of a one-time decision with linear consequences. Many of the interviewees refer to continued formative processes which entailed new experiences as well as ups and downs concerning their motivation for being a volunteer. It also becomes obvious that this process is often influenced by encounters with adults – ministers and other workers – and that motivation for voluntary work needs to be carefully supported over time. In any case, there is a need for additional experiences after confirmation if such motivations are to be upheld over time. The influence of confirmation time is clearly not enough to keep the motivation for becoming – and staying – a volunteer alive over possibly several years. For this reason, it is important that there are programs offered by the church for young people after confirmation and that such programs make it possible to sustain one’s commitment to voluntary work in the context of the church.

The qualitative studies also allow for insights into the reasons for not becoming a volunteer. Typically and interestingly in terms of confirmation work and the church, these reasons have nothing to do with being critical of volunteerism in general or with questioning its meaning and importance for the common good. Instead, just like in the quantitative questionnaires, the issue of time plays a pivotal role in the qualitative material. Yet the interviews reveal more clearly that the availability of time also has to do with personal priorities and with choices made by the young people themselves. Time appears to be a general problem for many adolescents and young adults who, in addition to following their personal interests in their free time, are struggling to find enough time-slots for their many school-related obligations and other tasks or interests, for example, in connection with their training for a profession or studying at a university. Yet some of them do find time for voluntary work while others do not. Consequently, the issue of time and of time constraints clearly deserves deeper scrutiny. Time cannot be interpreted as an exclusively objective limitation. This does not mean that the objective time constraints should be neglected – the many hours spent at school will naturally not allow for other activities outside of school, but the objective limitations are not the whole story. Subjective experiences and personal decisions also are of influence, in general as well as with finding time for voluntary commitment.

The emphasis on personal and subjective factors influencing the possible commitment to voluntary work is further corroborated by the fact that distance to the church as a general experience also seems to be a reason which explains why young people do not want to become volunteers. According to the interviews, this distance does not only refer to personal attitudes towards the church but also and more concretely to a lack of contact with the church after confirmation.

Concerning the motivation for being a volunteer, many interviewees explain how their initial personal motivation was reinforced through positive experiences with the group of volunteers to which they belonged or, in some cases, still belonged at the time of the interviews. It seems very important to them that there is a group of volunteers and that they are part of this group, not only sharing their work with their peers but also sharing many other things in terms of friendship. In many cases, young volunteers appear to experience their voluntary commitment as a basis for new friendships and for a sense of belonging which is dear to them. The following statement from a young volunteer shows this (Schweitzer et al. 2016, 98):

“It’s just like that there are the friends as well who are active there anyway, and then one thinks: yes, one does something with them or one does something which is good, so to say, and in addition, with the friends, that’s really fun [laughs], and this is really important for me”. (16-year-old male interviewee)

Another important theme in the interview material refers to competences which young people say they have acquired in the context of voluntary work – social competences and educational competences, for example, as well as experiences with leadership skills. More specifically, they speak of the process of gaining and

exercising competences by putting such competences to practical use, for example, in teaching situations with confirmands (the following statement comes from Schweitzer et al. 2016, 225).

“That one knows how long approximately I have to give them time for it. That one has a better feeling for this. That one does not think: okay, here is a verse from the Bible, all of you have to have read it in five minutes, have worked through everything, have interpreted everything as much as possible. That five minutes are not enough here, for example”. (17-year-old female interviewee)

In this context it is of special importance to many of the young people that their voluntary activities include and allow for a responsibility of their own. The young people obviously do not just want to take over tasks defined by others, for example, by a minister or a senior worker. They demand leeway for defining their own tasks themselves, for trying out new ways and of gathering insights with how they work.

In sum, the qualitative material demonstrates that young volunteers are willing to take over tasks and serious responsibilities but that they also want to be allowed to make decisions of their own concerning the ways in which they carry out their tasks. In some cases, the adolescents and young adults also have more far-reaching visions of how the church could become more attractive to young people in general – an asset which, according to the interviewees, has not been put to use in most parishes by taking up the young people’s ideas and putting them to practice. This observation shows that much remains to be done in terms of making the most of having young volunteers involved in confirmation work and other fields of work in church or society.

The results from the qualitative studies are quite rich and detailed which implies that it is not possible to do justice to them here. Readers who are interested in a more comprehensive presentation of these results should consult the publications from these research projects themselves (Schweitzer et al. 2016, 122–254; Ilg et al. 2018, 91–154). In the following, the focus will be on methodological questions.

4. Methodological considerations

Researching voluntary commitment after confirmation and long-term effects of confirmation work does indeed hold special methodological challenges. In the studies on which this chapter is based, voluntary commitment after confirmation was used as an indicator of long-term effects. It is clear that this is not the only possible indicator of such effects – other indicators would be, for example, personal faith-related convictions or the relationship to the church which were in fact also used in the projects but are not included in this chapter. Yet the example of voluntary commitment shows that there are a number of ways in which confirmation work and later voluntary commitment are in fact connected. Several features of confirmation work, especially the chance to have first experiences with voluntary

work during confirmation time, can be considered important predictors of later voluntary commitment. Methodologically, the identification of such predictors shows that it is indeed possible to reach reliable results concerning long-term effects of confirmation work

Especially the qualitative results also show that long-term effects should not be understood as only related to confirmation time itself. While experiences during confirmation time can be considered an important beginning, there are additional factors after confirmation which also need to be taken into consideration, like opportunities for meaningful contact with the church after confirmation and, even more importantly, experiences with voluntary work itself. These additional factors can be considered as necessary reinforcements of motives initially developed during confirmation time. They are necessary in the sense that in their absence, the initial motives would probably not have survived and definitively will not survive in the longer run.

This observation can also serve as an example of how quantitative and qualitative results can be connected. First of all, however, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, it must be clear that the results from the different studies described above cannot just be combined with each other by using them interchangeably. The quantitative and the qualitative studies worked with different samples and they employed different methodologies, including the actual research instruments (set questionnaires on the one hand and open interviews using only brief guidelines on the other). Moreover, the different studies were not part of an integrated consecutive research process in which quantitative and qualitative steps or phases could have built upon each other, for example, by developing hypotheses in qualitative studies and then testing the hypotheses quantitatively by using representative samples. Since this was not the case, it seemed most appropriate to view the different studies as different spotlights, each of them shedding light on certain aspects while leaving other aspects in the dark. This allowed for bringing the different results into conversation with each other without claiming to have achieved true triangulation. The resulting interpretations are richer and more reliable than understandings which are based on single studies or methodologies. Yet it is also obvious that, at least in certain respects, they remain hypothetical. For example, in future research the qualitative results concerning the need for additional experiences with the church after confirmation and for support, for example, from ministers in order to keep alive the motivation for being a volunteer could be tested quantitatively. This would require another major study with a design that is able to reliably capture different situations and experiences of volunteers, of their contacts with ministers and other senior workers, in terms of the duration of their commitment, of their tasks, etc. It is easy to see that the results which have become available so far, can be called a good beginning in most of these respects but that there is much space for future research as well.

There can be no doubt that making use of quantitative as well as qualitative methodologies proved to be useful because both research approaches allow for

finding answers to different questions. This applies, of course, in general but is of special importance in the present context. In a field like voluntary work, inevitably both objective and subjective factors play an important role. As the results indicate, voluntary commitment is closely related to experiences in young people's families of origin which can be called an objective factor since the impact of such experiences is not premised on young people being aware of this interrelationship (although this awareness can also be there and then be of influence as well). It is a relationship which was identified from the quantitative data and by statistical analysis. At the same time, the young volunteers' experiences – their thoughts and feelings connected to voluntary work – also are of influence. Such experiences can be captured more aptly by qualitative studies than by predefined questionnaires because, as the interviews show, they can be highly individual and personal.

Compared to formal educational settings like school, voluntary work in the context of the church or of other institutions in society is much more volatile. By definition, there are no predefined general regulations for how voluntary work is to be carried out, for example, in terms of the amount of time to be invested or of the responsibilities that a volunteer should have. This flexibility and openness makes empirical research much more difficult than in the case of school-related research. In the case of the research projects described in this chapter, the attempt was made to develop a number of different research designs, each of them in correspondence with the respective research questions and the situations or contexts addressed. Volunteers in confirmation work at the age of 16 to 18 years, for example, could be reached for group interviews by contacting systematically selected parishes in which their work takes place. The older age group in these studies, the 18- to 26-year-olds, could not be reached in this manner. This is why a professional research institute (Kantar EMNID) had to be contracted for this task. Altogether, the projects show that it was indeed possible to find viable research designs and samples which were suitable for investigating voluntary work, in itself as well as in the perspective of long-term effects of confirmation work.

Yet what ultimately counts in terms of empirical research will always and rightfully be valid research results. To some degree, the combination of the different studies can be considered a first step towards cross-validation between the studies and the different approaches. Another step was comparing results from the present studies with results from other research projects – parallel projects from other countries, general research on youth and religion, general surveys on volunteers, etc. In addition to this, adherence to the criteria of empirical research in the social sciences was mandatory for all of the present studies. Especially in the survey conducted by the Kantar EMNID Institute but also with the two national studies on confirmation work in Germany, it was possible to make use of fully representative samples, due to the continuing support from another professional social science institution (GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Mannheim).

5. Conclusions

The major conclusion from the various studies on confirmation work and on its long-term effects certainly must be that voluntary commitment after confirmation is an increasingly important type of non-formal religious education. In addition to its beneficial effects for the people who are addressed by this work, for example, the confirmands, it allows for experiences which are of special value for the development of the people doing this work themselves. It gives them access to a community of (young) voluntary workers, allows for experiencing one's abilities as well as for developing or acquiring new competences. All of these observations show that it is important to find out more about voluntary work and its presuppositions. Research findings of this kind can lead to more effective ways of supporting this field of non-formal religious education with an age group which tends to be hard to reach, for example, through programs offered by the church. The results which have become available so far also indicate that there is in fact a need for further improvements, among others concerning the selective and potentially exclusivist processes identified in the studies in relationship to recruiting potential new volunteers. More young people could and should be motivated to become volunteers – possibly they are even already in fact motivated but they have not been asked to become volunteers

In this sense, research on young volunteers is meaningful in itself because it can contribute to further developing the field. Yet from a different point of view, it also makes sense to view voluntary commitment after confirmation as one of the important long-term effects of confirmation work. Most of all, this way of considering and researching voluntary work shows that there are indeed palpable effects of confirmation work which can be traced even several years after confirmation.

In the context of research and discussing methodological questions, it is also important to state that the research reported in this chapter clearly adds to the general evidence of the feasibility of gaining valid research results on non-formal religious education. While it remains true that such research can be carried out more easily in the context of schools (which is probably one of the reasons why most existing studies were carried out there), it is not true that valid results cannot be reached in the non-formal sector of religious education. This should be considered a good reason for further research on non-formal religious education. It does not hold true that reliable research results cannot be reached here.

Taken together, the observations concerning the meaning of voluntary work and the possibility of interpreting the motivation for it as a long-term effect of confirmation work on the one hand and the feasibility of researching it on the other, the final conclusion must be that churches and other stakeholders in this field, including the state with its interest in a strong civil society, should feel encouraged and required to invest more resources into this field and also into research related to it. Clearly the studies described in this chapter can be viewed as an important beginning which, at the same time, implies that they are just a beginning. Much more should be known about the different fields of voluntary work and about the motiva-

tion that makes young people enter such a commitment, in the context of the church but also in society at large.

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