

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CREATIVITY AND SOCIAL COMPETENCIES IN THE MIRROR OF COMMUNITY-ORGANIZING EXPERIENCE

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE INSTITUTIONAL OPERATION OF THE SZEGED KLEBELSBERG-TELEP CIVIC CIRCLE ORGANIZATION

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This study analyses the significance of non-cognitive skills in voluntary civic group work, based on a case study. From the perspective of my two-decade experience in the Szeged Klebelsberg-telep Civic Circle Organization, I would like to assess to what extent organizational operation that keeps community life in motion depends on human personality traits that are referred to under the umbrella term *non-cognitive skills* by the literature analysing economic, social-psychological, and organizational culture. Following the definition of this set of skills, as well as a short presentation of the Organization which was established in 1999, the study focuses on locality and the significance of local communities, taking into consideration its human ethological aspects as well. Conflicts inevitably emerge in community life and their management is of critical importance, otherwise even the operation of the organization is threatened – it is in this context where it is crucial to raise awareness of the significance of non-cognitive competencies. The case study is based on the study methodology of participant observation, and more specifically, applies the emic perspective as I analyse my own experience as a member of the organization (Biczó 2003, Vörös–Frida 2004).

As the local group in the study can be defined as an organization, this is the first notion that needs to be clarified. Based on classic definitions, an organization is an intentionally coordinated activity to achieve goals that were mutually agreed on (Klein 2001: 370). The organization operating in Szeged Klebelsberg-telep, according to the objectives defined in its Charter<sup>22</sup>, works for the goals of improving local communal and cultural life, improving

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<sup>22</sup> The Charter of the Szeged Klebelsberg-telep Civic Circle Organization: <https://klebelsberg-egyesulet.hu/klebelsberg-egyesulet/> (downloaded: 2018. 09. 15.).

environmental protection, supporting sports, as well as nurturing local traditions. This is what the board and the members need to work for, and they need to do it in a coordinated way.

Cognitive (mental and intellectual) skills have an undoubtedly important role in the successful operation of a group, as they are essential for organizing and conducting the programmes, as well as for grants applications and accounts settlement, and even the operation of the organization itself. The good ideas, realistic and feasible plans, and correct economic administration by the members (first of all, the board) of the organization, as well as their experience and skills of using info-communicational tools, techniques of negotiation, of conducting forums and cultural programmes, require several cognitive competencies and empirical combinative skills (Nagy 1999: 15). These skills develop faster in childhood and early adulthood (Bjorklund-Young 2016). Experience, information, and knowledge base serve as a necessary, but not exclusive, foundation for successful organizational operation. Fruitful community work also requires skills of another nature.

How can non-cognitive skills be defined? They can be defined as personality traits or patterns of thought, feelings and behaviour, but the set of specific skills referenced depends upon the specific field of study. For example, psychologists classify non-cognitive skills in terms of the “Big Five” categories. These are: cooperativeness, collegiality, stress tolerance and self-control, acceptance and positive attitude (Fazekas 2017, Bjorklund-Young 2016). This group of skills promotes the expansion of cognitive competencies, and their development is not limited to young age. Among employee competencies, non-cognitive skills include emotional intelligence and flexible thinking, the significance of which is becoming increasingly acknowledged.

On the other hand, a more extensive study, also examining Eastern-Asian and South-American countries, has expanded the set of non-cognitive skills with the addition of the following ones: recognizing opportunities, motivation, persistence, self-control, meta-cognitive strategies, social competencies, flexibility, competitive edge, and creativity (Zhou 2016). All these are clearly distinguishable from cognitive skills as they are not built on objective or factual knowledge or intelligence, but they are commonly defined as attributes. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that these skills are malleable and improvable during the process of socialization, in training courses, or simply in the open, evaluative and self-analytical phases of organizational operation. Research also highlights that, although the intellectual development of children is an important factor in their progress at school, it is far from being the only one determining their career or success in social integration. It has also been proven by now that the development of non-cognitive skills has a more powerful effect on children’s opportunities and success later in the labour market than the development of cognitive competencies (Kézdi-Surányi 2010). The level

of non-cognitive competencies is crucial not only for the individual's progress but also in the operation of community life and voluntary work. Their importance is further increased by the fact that they can be improved in adulthood as well.

When briefly introducing the Organization established in 1999, it has to be emphasized that, regarding its settlement structure, Szeged Klebelsberg-telep is a suburb with natural borders (railway dam, fields, backwater) that was founded in the 1920s by families of people working for the railways, moving here from Vojvodina after the Treaty of Trianon. This led to the formation of a coherent and relatively closed community. In 1928, as a result of a local initiative, this part of the town was named after the minister of education and parliamentary representative of Szeged in those times, Count Kuno Klebelsberg. Then the local civic organization founded in 1929 started to operate under the same name. These traditions were revived after the change of the political system, thus the establishment of the organization in 1999 can be regarded as a "re-foundation". The self-organized civic organization started to work with a 5-person board and nearly 60 members, relying on cooperation with local inhabitants to meet their set objectives. At the time of the establishment of the organization, there was no community centre operating in this part of Szeged, thus the organization was hosted by the school building still functioning at that time, which also served as a venue for some of its programmes. The main objectives included the regular publication and distribution of a local newsletter (*Hírharang*), the establishment of the local community centre, the restoration of the sports field, as well as the rehabilitation of the highly polluted backwater of the river Tisza bordering this part of the city (Újvári 2007). The consistent pursuit of the initial objectives resulted in the successful work of the organization.

Based on all the above, the organization gained a preferred organization status from the city council of Szeged in 2014, as it operates as a communal and cultural space controlled by the city council. Thanks to this, the board of the organization runs a community centre, renting the school building that had been permanently closed in the meantime (Újvári 2016). A lot of new tasks emerged with the organizational work, grant management, and maintenance; this is why a building manager and an office worker had to be employed as well. However, most of the programmes are organized and conducted by the board members and through the voluntary work of some other members of the organization who regularly help. A group life has been created and maintained in the past two decades that corresponds to Klebelsberg's belief in the significance of locality: "The mission of cities is to perform major nation-wide tasks themselves with attention to their own specific local needs, which can only be really efficient with the constant interest and willing contribution of citizens who know local conditions" (Klebelsberg 1927: 345).

Human ethology also highlights the significance of group life based on people's social and synchronization skills, among other factors. For humans, the optimal space of operation is in smaller groups, communities – this explains the significance of locality and local communities (Csányi 1999). The biological foundation of communal behaviour enables us to acquire community culture through which “local communities need to be established to help everybody learn that humans can survive only in communities, and, besides keeping the advantages of centralisation, local culture is the ultimate good and most important human value” (Csányi 2015). Therefore, it is necessary to be aware of a system of values that was taken for granted in traditional forms of life, but difficult to implement today in our typically individualistic and atomized societies.

Although creativity, commitment, capacity for hard work, reliability, and social capital form the basis of the fruitful voluntary work that community life depends on, permanently emerging conflicts can only be managed with the following non-cognitive skills: cooperativeness, collegiality, stress tolerance, self-control, acceptance, and positive attitude. György Csepeli also emphasizes the social-psychological aspect of this issue, that is, how the group and the individual create conflicts. Studies in social psychology highlight the regular conflict situations of community life and groups: “The nature of a group is determined by the attitude, behavioural patterns and problems of the individual. The individual person never gives up his/her own needs or desire for freedom and the individual is permanently present in groups, which leads to conflicts” (Csepeli 1997: 189). Accordingly, conflicts are encoded in community work, their inevitable presence has to be anticipated.

Therefore, the main issue is not that of constantly avoiding conflicts or making efforts to eliminate them – this would actually result in tense situations, and would not support any solution of the problem. In fact, the realistic goal should be to strive for handling emerging conflicts, as well as finding solutions that are acceptable for most of the interested parties. This, however, in most cases, becomes more problematic because of the lack or weakness of non-cognitive skills, the over-dimensioning of individual perspectives, the judgemental attitude towards others, the presence of criticism (directed exclusively towards others), as well as the inadequate level of self-criticism. A potential source of problems is when the basic component of the establishment and operation of a group (a common goal or activity) is pushed into the background behind individual ambitions. Although individual ambitions could be in harmony with community goals, the right balance is often hard to find.

The more than 20-year operation of the Szeged Klebelsberg-telep organization has been challenged by several conflicts. The board of the organization, consisting of local community members willing to do voluntary work, has been heterogeneous (even with changes in its members), and it has been accompanied with all the typical

difficulties (Klein 2001: 267–270.) The main objectives initially set have remained in focus, and most of them have been realized: *Hírharang*<sup>23</sup> has been edited and distributed smoothly, three major community programmes have been established by the organization (the 1st of May celebrations and the day of Klebelsberg-telep), and the Local Christmas celebration, there is the common cleaning of public areas (garbage collection and hauling) twice a year, as well as the soccer cup (sports day) at the end of each summer. Since the late 1980s, there have been well-organized and successful events involving many local people. Several local communities have been hosted by the community centre operating since 2014 (retired people’s club, sports clubs, painting club, etc.). Furthermore, concerts, exhibitions, lectures are also regularly organized here. The two major fundraising events of the Foundation for Klebelsberg-telep (pig-butcherer feast and children’s day) are also conducted in coordination with the organization in the community centre. To achieve this, the cognitive (mental and intellectual) competencies of the board and active members play a key role.

On the other hand, the board of the organization is challenged by conflicts that might block efficient operation from time to time. Individual aspirations and problems often push the interests of the organization into the background. In my opinion, there is a need to improve non-cognitive skills as partial harmonization (“standing together” for the success of the programmes) should be supplemented by real cooperation and collegiality. To achieve a successful level of group operation, the improvement of stress tolerance and self control skills is also essential. Only positive attitude, cooperativeness, and collegiality would be appropriate in the field of individual skills, while the skill of acceptance in relation to the other members of the group could lead to an optimal solution of problems in the case of inevitable conflicts, as well as ensuring the continuous operation of the organization. Therefore, non-cognitive skills have a more and more crucial role not only on the labour market (Fazekas 2018), but also in the areas of organizational operation that characterize the community work of civic organizations.

As a conclusion, it can be stated that identification with and commitment to the goals of communal activity form the basis of voluntary activity in civic organizations. The individual can engage in activities according to his/her cognitive competencies to achieve this goal. Individual creativity, knowledge from earlier studies and work experience, reliability, and social capital also play a role. On the other hand, non-cognitive competencies play a crucial role in keeping the results and ensuring the long-term operation of community life: their significance need to be recognized and their development has to be ensured.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://klebelsberg-egyesulet.hu/hirharang/>.

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