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# Volunteering as an Explanatory Factor of Social Entrepreneurship: An Analysis of an Educational Context

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## Abstract

The promotion of entrepreneurial intention in educational contexts is a priority that is increasingly present in academic planning, especially at university level. Furthermore, social entrepreneurship has been gaining prominence not only as a formula for improving the welfare and equity of society as a whole, but also as a mechanism for professional development. Taking into account both aspects, this paper analyzes the effect of university students participating in volunteer activities on their intention to carry out social entrepreneurship projects. With this objective, this study is based on the Theory of Planned Action of Ajzen. A sample of 208 university students was analyzed, 96 of whom had some experience of volunteering. The results confirm that taking part in volunteering, during students' education, positively affects their intention to start social entrepreneurship projects. This result allows us to conclude that encouraging volunteering could be a good methodological tool to promote social entrepreneurship within the educational field. In addition, the implementation of this type of social project could benefit university students not only by making social improvements to their environment, but also as a labor insertion tool.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurship Education, Social Entrepreneurship, University, Entrepreneurial Intention, Volunteering

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, intervention programs aimed at promoting an entrepreneurial spirit in the classroom have proliferated in educational centers, especially in university contexts [1, 2]. The effectiveness of these intervention programs has been amply demonstrated as a way of improving the entrepreneurial intention among their participants [3–11].

Particularly, and, as far as the university sphere is concerned, it has been confirmed that higher education centers are a potential source of future entrepreneurs [8, 12, 13]. Indeed, entrepreneurship has become an increasingly important work option that is highly valued by students [14–17].

Within the programs related to promoting entrepreneurial intention, in the current socioeconomic context, the specific area of social entrepreneurship has been gaining importance [18–20]. In this sense, according to Kaya et al. [21], students who can be described as social lead users, whose social vision is beyond the existing market for providing solutions to social problems, are more likely to be entrepreneurs than those who cannot be described as social lead users. Thus, analyzing the cognitive schemes associated with social entrepreneurship is an important academic challenge [22–24].

Aware of this need and taking into account that altruism and volunteer activities can be a key explanatory element when characterizing social entrepreneurship [25–29], the present work aims to measure the effect participating in volunteer activities has on the intention to carry out social entrepreneurship projects. In this sense, the model of planned behavior [30, 31] is the relationship framework that is most popular for introducing personal and contextual variables, and has rigorous theoretical support [32, 33].

Therefore, and starting from the Theory of Planned Behavior, we compare the entrepreneurial intention towards social projects based on attitudes towards this behavior, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control of a group of students with experience in volunteering with another group that lacks this experience.

The paper begins with a brief review of the theoretical background of social entrepreneurship, and then reflects on the possible relationships between personal factors and social concerns. The proposed model is presented below, the methodology of the study is described and the main results are detailed. Finally, the main conclusions are highlighted.

## **2. Social entrepreneurship: concept and scope**

Kao [34] already pointed out that entrepreneurship, in general terms, can be defined as the process linked to ‘doing something new and something different’ with the aim of adding value, both to the individual and to society. Social entrepreneurship is framed within this conceptual field, in fact, “social entrepreneurs share many of the same qualities that regular entrepreneurs share: their ventures are typically of high risk, they are characteristically skilled at stretching resources more efficiently, and typically they have a new idea that fills a niche in the market” ([35]; p. 9).

The concept of “social enterprise” started to gain popularity between the 1980s and 1990s, promoted by Bill Drayton, founder of Ashoka, a non-profit organization based in the United States, which develops activities focused on social entrepreneurship. However, there is still no clear academic consensus regarding its meaning [36]. Despite the diversity of nuances that shape this concept, there are three common ideas that are repeated in all their meanings [18, 20, 36–40]:

- a. Social entrepreneurship has the aim of creating **social value**, and not individual wealth, focusing on solving **social problems** and not individual needs [41]. The creation of social value refers to the change generated for good in the lives of individuals, through the achievement of socially desirable goals.
- b. This value creation is developed through **social innovation**, not economic innovation [42, 43]. This requires special attention to the efficient use of resources, combining them and managing them optimally.

- c. Social projects become the driving force that stimulates **social change**. In this sense, it is a priority to have the capacity to identify the opportunities that can become authentic catalysts of social change [44].

Martin and Osberg [40] differentiate between traditional organizations that provide social services and firms of a social nature. In fact, the term *sustainable social value* differentiates social entrepreneurship from charitable works or charitable actions [41, 45, 46]. This concept of sustainability refers to the intention to maintain social activity over time and not just solve a social problem of a temporary nature.

In short, following Guzmán and Trujillo [47] and Sastre-Castillo et al. [45], we understand that social entrepreneurship is a specific type of entrepreneurship that seeks to solve social problems through the construction, evaluation and pursuit of opportunities that allow the generation of sustainable social value, reaching new and stable equilibriums in relation to social conditions.

This central objective of obtaining a social benefit does not mean that social entrepreneurship projects should be developed under the legal umbrella of non-profit associations only. In this sense, there is a significant trend of nonprofit entities to be created with non-traditional legal forms. Eikenberry and Kluver [48] explain this change by the budget cuts suffered by some social programs and the decrease in donations received by the private sector.

Along these lines, some authors [39, 42] recommend the creation of hybrid business models or new forms of social entrepreneurship that bring together elements of both traditional social and commercial enterprises.

According to Guo and Bielefeld [35], the main differentiating element of social entrepreneurs compared to regular entrepreneurs is that the former “are not merely trying to make the best out of the current situation, but instead create a wholly new situation in which to operate. They have a business and social mission, and through that mission change the way the system functions”. Along these lines, following Austin et al. [42] and Dorado [49], we could categorize the main differences that exist between a commercial or business enterprise and a social enterprise in four groups:

- a. Definition of opportunity: A problem for the commercial entrepreneur is an opportunity for the social entrepreneur. In this sense, while opportunities are abundant for social entrepreneurs, the same does not occur for commercial entrepreneurs.
- b. Mission: The fundamental purpose of social entrepreneurship is the creation of social value, while commercial entrepreneurs seek the creation of profitable operations from an economic point of view.
- c. Mobilization of resources: The way to capture resources, both human and financial, in both types of enterprises is different. The majority of social projects are not able to adequately reward highly qualified and competitive personnel, and the greatest effort of social enterprises is in the search for financial resources, due to their lack of cash flows and assets [49].
- d. Measurement of performance: Social enterprises face great difficulties in evaluating performance due to the impossibility of measuring social impacts, while economic ones are easier to quantify.

Indeed, the existence of organizations whose objectives are generating benefits for the community is not something new; rather it has been a concern from the very

first civilizations. What is new is the growing interest that this type of activity has awakened in recent years, in both academic and government institutions [22]. Much of this interest is due to the fact that, in many cases, social entrepreneurs provide innovative social solutions that are more sustainable and effective than those provided by the public sector [37, 50, 51]. In fact, Bargsted [52] recognizes in social entrepreneurship an alternative path towards social and economic progress.

However, and despite this interest, empirical approaches are scarce [45] and there is still a considerable scientific vacuum in terms of the dynamics and processes that favor the generation of social entrepreneurship projects [27, 29, 53–56]. In this sense, Certo and Miller [22] highlight the importance of determining the personal characteristics and cognitive schemes of social entrepreneurs, in order to promote these types of initiatives.

### **3. Personal factors: driving force of social entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurial activity, like any process, requires some planning until it materializes in the creation of a business, with the intention of entrepreneurship being the step prior to its effective implementation and, therefore, its best predictor [31, 57–59].

However, there is still a significant gap in understanding how the antecedents of this intention and how its conditioning factors are formed [60]. With regard to social entrepreneurship, following North [61, 62] the start-up of this type of projects responds, fundamentally, to two kinds of motives: formal, such as reasons for public spending and access to financing and informal ones of governmental efficiency, such as social needs, social attitudes and education [63].

Urbano et al. [64] recognize that reasons of an informal nature, and linked to personal aspects, exert a greater influence on the generation of new social entrepreneurship projects. Similarly, Hemingway [65] considers that personal factors determine the propensity of an individual to create social ventures.

#### **3.1 Explanatory model of entrepreneurial intention**

Entrepreneurial intention, in the general field of entrepreneurship and by extension to the case of social entrepreneurship, depends fundamentally on a combination of personal and social factors [66–68]. According to this argument, among all the models that try to explain entrepreneurial intention, that of the Theory of Planned Action [31, 57] has become the one that best reflects the entrepreneurial process, insofar as it explains entrepreneurial intention based on the interaction between personal and social factors.

This theory proposes that entrepreneurial intention depends on the influence that three variables have on it: attitude towards behavior, the subjective norm and the perceived behavioral control. The attitude towards entrepreneurial behavior will depend on the beliefs that a certain person has about certain behaviors. Moreover, these beliefs will depend on the consequences that the subject perceives could be triggered by such behavior and its evaluation. The subjective norm can be defined as the perception of social pressure to carry out or not a particular behavior [31]. Scores of subjective norm are obtained from the analysis of two variables: the beliefs about how other significant persons think that the individual should behave (normative beliefs), and the motivation that refers to the general tendency that exists in complying with the norms of a group taken as a reference [68]. Finally, perceived behavioral control refers to the greater or lesser difficulty that the person perceives to perform the behavior [57]. Regarding this variable, Ajzen [57] breaks it



down into two dimensions: self-efficacy (belief in one's own abilities to organize and execute behavior) and controllability (belief about the control one has over one's own behavior).

Although in the field of entrepreneurship the Theory of Planned Action (TPA, hereafter) has been widely applied, in the specific case of social entrepreneurship the development of the model has been rather scarce [54, 69, 70]. This means that the field in general is still in the process of configuration and development, especially in terms of the explanatory background of social entrepreneurial intention [29, 45, 55, 66].

### **3.2 Volunteering and social entrepreneurship**

For Osorio [71], the training of altruistic people, as a vehicle to enhance pro-social behavior, is one of the great challenges faced by current educators. In this sense, this same author, suggests that empathy is one of the main engines of altruism, in the sense that if 'one learns to suffer with the suffering of others, and to be happy and alleviated with the joy and relief of others, you will find a certain pleasure in altruistic actions, and you will be, therefore, more prone to carry out such actions'.

Likewise, the capacities of an entrepreneur are not fixed or immovable traits or characteristics, but can be modified over time and, therefore, developed and learned through experience [72]. Bird and Romanelli [73] identified a strong relationship between experience and the trajectory of founders of enterprises and the type of business entrepreneurship they generated. Moreover, Zahra et al. [74] affirm that the linking of potential social entrepreneurs with activities related to the social sector fosters the capacity to become more altruistic citizens and, therefore, a greater capacity to identify new social opportunities. In this sense, several researches coincide in demonstrating that prior social experience is a relevant aspect in the generation of social entrepreneurship projects [22, 42]. These findings can be explained on the basis that volunteer work [75] and service learning [25] enhance a sense of social responsibility among participants.

In this sense, in an exploratory study by Scheiber [29], conducted in Brazil, it is pointed out that participation in volunteer work can be one of the explanatory factors, even the essential motivation, for the subsequent implementation of social entrepreneurship projects. This can be explained because volunteers often obtain a more intimate awareness and understanding of those most affected by social problems through volunteer work. However, following Scheiber [29], it is necessary to develop quantitative studies in other territorial areas, aimed at other populations, especially younger people to explain this relationship. This is framed in the need to improve the explanatory factors of social entrepreneurship [67] and to consolidate a general theory for this field [76].

Under these premises, and aware of the role of universities as promoters of capabilities linked to entrepreneurship and more specifically to social entrepreneurship [69, 77] it is necessary to determine the antecedents of social entrepreneurship, comparing it to business entrepreneurship and the importance of having carried out previous volunteer activities.

## **4. Methodology**

A total of 208 university students participated in this research, 96 of them volunteers and 112 non-volunteers. Of the total sample, 67.1% were women and the

rest men. The mean age was 32.59 (SD = 15.05). **Table 1** shows a summary of the characteristics of the sample.

For this study, a questionnaire was developed that included 37 questions (see Appendix). The confidentiality of the data collected was guaranteed, as well as the anonymity of the participants. The questionnaire included the following sections:

1. *Adaptation of the Entrepreneurial Intention Questionnaire (EIQ)*. Developed by Moriano et al. [68], this instrument measures the entrepreneurial intention using the TPA of Ajzen [31]. The general wording of the questionnaire items is adapted by the way in which reference is made to start-up projects with social content, instead of a business one. The answers range from 1 (not interested/not at all / not, never) and 7 (totally interested/totally in agreement/yes, many times).

The questionnaire contains a first block of questions aimed at measuring personal attitude towards entrepreneurship, through two scales of seven items each, which gather the beliefs and assess the consequences of entrepreneurship. In the adaptation carried out for this research, an item has been included in the attitude block related to the desire to achieve social improvement, and another item to measure its assessment.

A second block of the questionnaire measures subjective norms, by means of two scales of three items each, which measure the normative beliefs and participants' motivation to adjust to these norms perceived by the influence of direct family, close friends, co-workers or colleagues.

The third block of the questionnaire includes the controllability scale, with 5 items, since two new items were included in relation to the questionnaire proposed by Moriano et al. [68]: “*I am ready to start a social project*” and “*I know how to develop a social project*”.

Finally, the fourth block of the questionnaire measures the entrepreneurial intention through 3 items “*Have you ever considered starting a social project?*”, “*Do you think that in the future you will create a social project?*”, and “*How likely do you think it is that you will create your own social project within five years?*”

2. *Other measures*. In the questionnaire, 12 items were included whose objectives were to identify the age and sex of participants, as well as their studies, experience as volunteers/intention to participate in volunteer activities.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Men		32.9
Women		67.1
Experience of volunteering		
Yes	96	16.2
No	112	16.2
Educational level		
Compulsory Education	41	19.7
Further education	45	22
University studies	84	40.2
Master degree or doctorate degree	31	15

**Table 1.**  
Sample characteristics (N = 208).

This questionnaire was delivered to and completed by participants at a Conference on Solidarity organized by a medium-size European university and the Volunteer Office of the *Cabildo de Tenerife* (Island Government in Canary Island, Spain). This conference was attended by people who volunteered as well as non-volunteers.

5. Results

5.1 Descriptions, reliability and correlations between the variables of interest

First, with the sample as a whole, the mean scores and standard deviations of the dimensions were calculated. In addition, the reliability of each dimension was calculated through Cronbach’s Alpha, and an analysis of the existing correlations between Entrepreneurial Intention, Social Entrepreneurship and the dimensions of the TPA model was carried out. **Table 2** presents a summary of the results obtained. A moderately high correlation was observed between Entrepreneurial Intention and Social Entrepreneurship ( $r = .418$ ;  $p < .01$ ), which indicates that these are two independent constructs, although they are related. Social entrepreneurship showed a very high correlation with controllability ( $r = .706$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and personal attitude ( $r = .401$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ).

5.2 Comparison between volunteer and non-volunteer participants

To check if there are differences in the dimensions studied between voluntary and non-voluntary participants, comparisons of means were carried out, the results of which are presented in **Table 3**. These results indicate that there are statistically significant differences between the groups of volunteers and non-volunteers in the intention to carry out social

	Mean (SD)	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5
1. Entrepreneurial Intention	4.57 (2.11)	—	—				
2. Social Entrepreneurship	3.96 (1.68)	.878	.418**	—			
3. Attitude	30.73 (8.97)	.828	.330**	.401**	—		
4. Subjective Norm	12.95 (5.04)	.819	.163*	.255**	.559**	—	
5. Controllability	3.68 (1.31)	.858	.375**	.706**	.437**	.160*	—
* $p < 0.05$ .							
** $p < 0.01$ .							

**Table 2.**  
*Matrix of correlations between the variables studied.*

	Mean Volunteers	Mean Non-Volunteers	t (gl)	Sign.
Entrepreneurial Intention	4.50	4.62	−0.366 (171)	.715
Social Entrepreneurship	4.39	3.63	3.037 (172)	.003
Attitude	31.40	30.25	0.849 (177)	.397
Subjective Norm	12.80	13.07	−0.358 (171)	.721
Controllability	3.98	3.45	2.722 (172)	.007

**Table 3.**  
*T-tests for the variables of the TPA model and social entrepreneurship depending on experience or no experience of voluntary actions.*



entrepreneurship, as well as in the perception of controllability. In both measures, the group of volunteers presents scores higher than that of non-volunteers.

5.3 Predictors of social entrepreneurship

To determine if similar or different predictive models are produced for the criteria of entrepreneurial intention and social entrepreneurship, a multiple linear regression analysis was carried out for each of these dimensions, including the prediction variables Attitude, Subjective norm and Controllability. The results obtained are presented in **Table 4**.

The results obtained show that the predictive capacity of the model is greater for social entrepreneurship, with 51% of the variance of the criterion variable explained, compared to entrepreneurial intention ( $R^2_{adj} = .160$ ). In the predictive model of entrepreneurial intention, Attitude and Controllability are statistically significant. Specifically, for each unit increase in Controllability, entrepreneurial intention increases 0.29, and for each unit increment in attitude, entrepreneurial intention increases by 0.20. When the regression model is applied to social entrepreneurship, the subjective norm and controllability are the two predictor variables that are statistically significant in the model. Specifically, for each unit increase in controllability, the intention of social entrepreneurship increases by 0.67, and for each unit increase in subjective norm, the intention of social entrepreneurship rises by 0.13.

Finally, in order to compare the groups of volunteers and non-volunteers, multiple linear regression analyzes were carried out separately for each group, for the social entrepreneurship criterion variable, including as predictor variables Attitude, Subjective norm and Controllability. The results obtained are presented in **Table 5**.

In the case of the volunteer sample, the predictive model explains 44% of the variance of the criterion variable. In this case, controllability and subjective norm are the variables with predictive power. Specifically, for each unit increase in controllability, Social Entrepreneurship increases by 0.49, and for each unit increase in subjective norm, there is a 0.28 increase in Social Entrepreneurship.

<i>Criterion: Entrepreneurial Intention (<math>R^2_{adj} = .160</math>)</i>			
	Regression Coefficient	t	p
Intercept	1.401	2.404	.017
Attitude	.203	2.180	.031
Subjective Norm	.004	0.050	.960
Controllability	.286	3.662	<.001
<i>Criterion: Social Entrepreneurship (<math>R^2_{adj} = .512</math>)</i>			
	Regression Coefficient	t	p
Intercept	.052	0.148	.883
Attitude	.039	0.544	.587
Subjective Norm	.126	1.943	.054
Controllability	.669	11.231	<.001

**Table 4.**  
*Results of the regression analysis for the criterion variables entrepreneurial intention and social entrepreneurship.*

Group: Volunteers			
	Regression coefficient	t	p
Intercept	.077	0.127	.899
Attitude	.102	0.942	.349
Subjective Norm	.283	2.820	.006
Controllability	.490	5.133	<.001
Group: Non-Volunteers			
	Regression Coefficient	t	p
Intercept	-.265	0.646	.520
Attitude	.015	0.159	.874
Subjective Norm	.005	0.056	.955
Controllability	.765	10.212	<.001

**Table 5.**  
*Results of the regression analysis for the criterion variable social entrepreneurship in volunteers and non-volunteers.*

6. Conclusions

This paper analyzes the possible relationship between entrepreneurial intention in projects of a social nature and participation in volunteer activities. From the results obtained some preliminary conclusions can be drawn that confirm the value of expanding our knowledge of social entrepreneurship and its explanatory factors, especially the role that volunteering plays.

On the one hand, the results reveal that entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship are different dimensions which, although they are related, maintain a clear independence of each other. In this sense, it is noteworthy that experience as a volunteer increases the intention to carry out social entrepreneurship projects, but does not produce differential effects on entrepreneurial intention in general. This positive relation between volunteer work and social entrepreneurship confirms previous exploratory work, such as that of Sheiber [29] or Kaya et al. [21], emphasizing the importance of social lead user to recognize the social problems and to launch startups for providing solutions in a more efficient way than public sector institutions. It encourages further progress to analyze this relationship in other geographical areas and with other population samples.

Moreover, the sample highlights the predictive capacity of the dimensions studied in relation to social entrepreneurship. This allows us to conclude that the model of planned behavior [30, 31] constitutes a valid approach to social entrepreneurship, as is the case of regular entrepreneurship. Among these variables, for the group of volunteers, controllability and subjective norm are the most relevant. In the case of non-volunteers, perceived control over social entrepreneurship is the only explanatory variable. These data indicate that for volunteers, the opinion of family and friends regarding the intention to carry out social projects in order to consider social entrepreneurship is more important than for non-volunteers.

With regard to the comparative analysis between the volunteers and non-volunteers, it is observed that the experience as a volunteer seems to increase the desire to undertake projects of a social nature. In addition, the group of volunteers perceives a greater level of control over launching a social project, in comparison with people who have not taken part in voluntary actions. Possibly, this difference

in controllability is due to the knowledge accumulated through experience, related to the having worked with institutions and groups, etc., which ultimately translates into an increase in confidence.

The results are very useful for organizations that must work with generation Z intrapreneurs in order to face challenges they have to cope with, in the sense indicated by Singh Ghura [78]. It seems that promoting volunteer activities could aid to create the organizational supportive environment needed to facilitate an intrapreneurial culture in the organization and therefore to increase corporate entrepreneurship and product innovation [79].

From the point of view of entrepreneurial university education, it seems, therefore, that the promotion of volunteer activities, the dissemination of inspiring examples of people with experience as volunteers, among other actions, could constitute good methodological tools to promote social entrepreneurship, although not business entrepreneurship. Therefore, the results confirm the potential of the university as a promoter of capabilities linked to social entrepreneurship, as pointed out in some previous works like those by García-Morales et al. [19], Co and Cooper [69] or by Richomme-Huet and Freyman [77]. It also seems to confirm the suitability of the methodologies linked to service learning [2, 25] to increase the social entrepreneurship intention in the university educational context. Finally, it should be noted these social projects can serve university students not only as vehicles to produce social improvements in their environment, but also as tools for their own future labor insertion.

Appendix: Adaptation of the entrepreneurial intention questionnaire

1st block: personal attitude

To what extent do you agree that starting a social project (non-governmental organization, non-profit association, volunteer ...) for you would mean:								
		Not at all		Moderately			Completely	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Facing new challenges								
Creating employment for other people								
Achieving social improvement								
Being creative and innovative								
Having sufficient income								
Taking calculated risks								
Being independent (your own boss, making your own decisions)								
To what extent are the following aspects desirable for you, in your life in general?								
		Not at all		Moderately			Completely	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Facing new challenges								
Creating employment for other people								

To what extent are the following aspects desirable for you, in your life in general?							
	Not at all		Moderately			Completely	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Achieving social improvement							
Being creative and innovative							
Having sufficient income							
Taking calculated risks							
Being independent (your own boss, making your own decisions)							

2nd block: subjective norms

Think now of your closest family and friends. To what extent would they agree with you if you decided to start a social project (non-governmental organization, non-profit association, volunteer ...)?							
	Not at all		Moderately			Completely	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My direct family (mother, father, siblings)							
My close friends							
My co-workers or colleagues							

How much do you value the opinion of these people in this regard?							
	Not at all		Moderately			Completely	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My direct family (mother, father, siblings)							
My close friends							
My co-workers or colleagues							

3rd block: controllability

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements:							
	Not at all		Moderately			Completely	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
If I wanted, I could easily start a social project							
I am ready to start a social project							
If I started a social project, I would have total control over the situation							
I know how to develop a social project							
There are few circumstances outside my control that would prevent me from developing a social project							

4th block: entrepreneurial intention

Indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements:								
		Not at all		Moderately		Completely		
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Have you ever considered starting a social project?								
Do you think that in the future you will create a social project?								
How likely do you think it is that you will create your own social project in five years?								

5th block: Demographic data

Gender	Age	Indicate if you are a:	If you are a university student specify the university degree you are studying
Man	1	years	University student 1
Woman	2		University staff (Admin or Teaching) 2
			Collaborator with some association 3
			Other 4

Do you have experience as a volunteer?	Yes	1	No	2	If yes, for how long?
					Less tan 1 year 1
					Between 1 and 5 years 2
					More than 5 years 3
I have no experience but I would like to participate in volunteer activities					
I do not intend to participate in volunteer activities					



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