

Senior Volunteerism and Social Context: Implications for Volunteer Recruitment

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Abstract:

Senior population provides significant amount of volunteer work in communities across America. Using data from the Arizona Health Survey 2010, this study examines the impact of social context on senior volunteering. The results show that seniors who have more friends to rely on, who often hang out with others, help friends and neighbors, and participate in social clubs or religious and other organizations are more likely to volunteer. Education and self reported physical health also increase their chance of volunteering. Additionally, African American seniors are more likely to report volunteering than their Hispanic counterparts. The findings suggest the importance of social context in encouraging senior volunteering and imply the significance of network-based volunteer recruitment among seniors.

Key Words: senior volunteering, social networks, participation, social context, informal help

Introduction

Americans over 65 and older represent 13% of total population in the United States, and that number is estimated to be 20% by 2030. Senior population provides significant amount of volunteer services in communities across America. Recent statistics show that more than 440,000 Senior Corps volunteers provided 98 million hours of service in 2010, which is estimated to be worth \$2 billion (Tan, 2011). To harness the benefits of senior volunteering for American communities, it is imperative to understand the factors that influence seniors' decision to volunteer and design policies and programs accordingly to boost volunteering among older adults.

Literature on senior volunteerism has identified various factors related to volunteering among older adults, such as their socioeconomic characteristics (i.e. age, gender, race, education, income, religion, employment status) and health (physical and mental well-being) (Einolf, 2009; Okun, 1993; Wilson, 2012). Recently scholars started to examine the relationship between volunteering and social context, such as social networks, community environment, and associational participation, among the general public or ethnic minorities (Brown & Ferris, 2007; Rotolo, Wilson & Hughes, 2010; Wang, Yoshioka & Ashcraft, 2012). Very few studies, however, have applied it to older adults in America. Using data from the Arizona Health Survey 2010, this study

will extend the literature by examining the following research questions: (1) how would seniors' institutional and interpersonal social networks, respectively, influence their decisions' to volunteer for organizations; (2) are seniors who help friends and neighbors often more likely to volunteer for organizations; (3) how would community attachment and perception of a community affect seniors' decision to volunteer; and (4) how would health status and socioeconomic characteristics influence seniors' decision to volunteer.

To address these questions, we will first present a theoretical framework of seniors' decision to volunteer based on the literature review, then explain the data and methods used in this study. The results of the analysis will be presented followed by a discussion of implications of the findings.

Literature Review

Volunteering behavior is jointly influenced by individuals' human, social and cultural capitals (Wilson & Musick, 1997). In this section, we develop a theoretical framework of senior volunteering, expanding the social capital explanation of voluntary behavior by examining the correlation between older adults' decision to volunteer and their formal social networks, interpersonal networks, informal help, and community connections.

Formal social networks

People who are actively involved in activities of social organizations are more likely to volunteer (Einolf & Chambre, 2011). In his study of changes in voluntary participation, Putnam (2000) found that people who watch a lot of TV volunteer much less than those who spend less time in front of the tube. Chambre (1984) also found volunteering is a substitute for other types of individual leisure activities among older adults. One explanation of the positive relationship between formal social networks

and an individual's propensity to volunteer is that individuals who are extravert tend to be active in social activities and are more likely to volunteer for organizations (Okun, Pugliese, & Rook, 2007; Rossi, 2001). Additionally, seniors who are connected to social clubs, religious organizations or other groups and who participate in the meetings or events organized by these organizations are more likely to learn about volunteering opportunities as well. Studies show that formal social networks, particularly those with religious congregations, have a strong impact on volunteering (Cnaan, Kasternakis, & Wineberg, 1993; Einolf & Chambre, 2011; Park & Smith, 2000). Thus, we posit that formal social networks increase older adults' likelihood of volunteering.

Informal social networks and social interaction

Individuals who have friends or family members in the local area and who interact with friends and neighbors often are more likely to volunteer than those who have less informal social networks or are socially isolated as social contacts could increase people's chance of being asked to volunteer (Bekkers, 2005; Okun et al., 2007), particularly if their friends and family members volunteer. Einolf and Chambre (2011) found that informal socializing with neighbors significantly increases the likelihood of volunteering. The impacts of informal social networks and social interaction on seniors' decision to volunteer are potentially more significant, compared to the impact on other adults, as majority of older adults are out of the labor force and therefore are less likely to learn about volunteering opportunities from workplace. According to the social resource theory, withdrawing from the labor force weakens social integration, and thus may lead to a decline in volunteering (Wilson, 2000). Interacting with friends and neighbors who volunteer not only integrates seniors into a

community, but also helps develop/promote social norms of volunteering for organizations. Additionally, seniors may be motivated to volunteer for an organization to develop some informal social networks and spend free time with friends (Clary, Snyder & Stukas, 1996). Thus, we expect seniors with more informal social networks and who interact with other more often have a higher chance of volunteering.

Informal Help

Studies show that informal help generally have a positive relationship with formal volunteering (Lee & Brudney, 2012). One explanation is that people who often help friends and neighbors tend to be caring and willing to give, and thus their personality makes them more likely to engage in formal volunteering when needed. Another explanation is that people volunteer for organizations to develop or strengthen social relationships. The social connections they obtained from their formal volunteering work would increase their social circle and thus give them more opportunities to help friends and neighbors informally (Onyx & Leonard, 2002). In this study, we posit that older adults who help friends and neighbors often are also more likely to engage in formal volunteering.

Community Connections

Prior studies have found that individuals who consider themselves to be part of a community tend to volunteer more to better the community (Coulthard, Walker, & Morgan, 2002; Perkins, Brown, & Taylor, 1996). People develop a sense of attachment to a community as they own a home in the community and/or have lived in the community for a long time. Homeowners and long-term residents are found to be more civically engaged than those who are renting or who have recently arrived (Perkins, et al., 1996; Rotolo et al., 2010), as they have more of a stake in the safety and quality of life in the community and thus are

more willing to invest time and effort to help improve the surroundings. Additionally, as it takes time to get connected to organizations and learn about volunteering opportunities, seniors living in a community for a longer period of time are expected to be more likely to volunteer. Moreover, people are more likely to participate in community activities when they perceive the neighborhood to be safe (Coulthard et al., 2002). Some studies, however, show that neighborhood safety and quality do not affect people's decision to volunteer (Einolf & Chambre, 2011). In this study, we expect community connection and perceived neighborhood safety to increase seniors' propensity to volunteer.

Health status and socioeconomic characteristics

Good health and ability to function are necessary for people to participate in volunteering activities. Although older adults may have more time to volunteer, physical or mental health (like depressive symptoms) may become an obstacle for their participation or force them to reduce volunteer activities (Li & Ferraro, 2006; Wilson & Musick, 1997; Wilson, 2000). Therefore, we take physical and mental health into consideration in our framework of senior volunteering and posit that they are positively associated with seniors' propensity to volunteer.

In addition, we control for socioeconomic characteristics likely to be associated with older adults' decision to volunteer. Adults over ages 85 and above are less likely to volunteer due to various concerns, such as their health status (Herzog, Kahn & Morgan, 1989). Thus, age is expected to have a negative association with the chance of volunteering among older adults. Female seniors are expected to be more likely to volunteer as American women generally volunteer more than men (e.g., Caro & Bass, 1995; Chambre, 1984). Hispanic/Latino seniors are expected to be

less likely to volunteer than Whites and Blacks as the dominant status model predicts less participation for minorities due to their less prevalent social positions and roles within the socio-cultural system (Smith, 1994; Bryant, Jeon-Slaughter, Kang, & Tax, 2003; Gallagher, 1994; Sundeen, 1992).

High income and education levels increase the likelihood of civic engagement. This not only applies to the general population (Wilson, 2000), but also to minority groups (Sundeen, Garcia, & Wang, 2007; Wang, et al., 2012). For the same reason, we expect education and income to increase an older adult's propensity to volunteer. Unemployed seniors are expected to be less likely to volunteer than those employed full-time or part-time as they may have less social connections to organizations (Wilson, 2012).

Existing studies largely find family characteristics, such as being married and having children, to be the facilitators of volunteering (Rossi, 2001). Married people may volunteer more because the institution of marriage accompanies the social expectation, among others, that married couples be active in the community and its local organizations. The presence of children is also found to promote parental volunteering (Park & Smith, 2000; Wang, et al., 2012). Thus, we expect married seniors and those with grandchild under 18 living in house to be more likely to volunteer.

Methods

Data

Data for this study derive from the 2010 Arizona Health Survey, which was designed to investigate Arizona adults' physical, mental, and social well-being, which include their health condition, health behavior, employment and poverty status, social networks and civic participation. Telephone interviews of 8,215 adult household heads living in Arizona were

conducted between May 4 and July 22, 2010. Respondents were selected using Random Digit Dialing (RDD), a procedure that excludes businesses and includes unlisted residential telephone numbers. Samples were weighted to adjust for the increased number of people using cell phones as their only means of telecommunication and to be representative of the statewide population in Arizona allowing for generalization based upon the demographic characteristics of the population. This study focuses on senior population ages 65 and above. After excluding missing values of variables included in the analysis, 2,276 older adults are included in the analysis.

Variable Measurements and Analysis

The dependent variable, volunteering, is coded as 1 if the respondent performed a job without compensation for an organization, including for-profit corporations, nonprofit, religious or social institutions, or neighborhood groups, during the past 12 months, and as 0 otherwise.

Formal social network, ranging from 0 to 7 or more, is measured by the number of times the respondent attended meetings of social clubs, religious or other groups that he/she belongs to in the past week. Informal social network is measured by the number of persons in the respondents' local area that they can depend on or feel very close to. It is coded as 1 if there was no one the respondent felt close to, 2 if there were one to two people and 3 if there were more than two people. Visit, ranging from 0 to 7 or more, is measured by the number of times in the past week that the respondent spent some time with someone who does not live with him/her. *Informal help* is measured by the number of times the respondent provided help without being paid to friends not in the same household in the past 12 months. It ranges from never, a few days out of the 12 months, about a day a month, about a day a week, two or three days a week, to daily or

almost daily. Years in the community is measured by the number of years the respondent had lived in the current neighborhood. Neighborhood safety is coded as 4 if the respondent felt safe in the neighborhood all of the time and as 1 if he/she felt safe in the neighborhood none of the time. Due to space limit, the measurements of the control variables are explained in Table 1.

The logistics regression method is applied to analyze seniors' propensity to volunteer. The model was weighted to ensure the generalizability of the findings. The fitness of the model was tested by calculating a pseudo measure of explained variance (R²) using log-likelihood estimates. The coefficients, standard errors, and odds ratios of independent variables were reported.

Results

Approximately 48% of the sampled older adults volunteered for an organization in the last 12 months (see Table 1). On average, respondents participated in meetings at a social club and religious or other groups once in the past week, had two or more persons in the local area they could depend on or felt close to, visited or socialized with friends three times in the past week, and helped out friends about a day a month in the past 12 month. Additionally, they had lived in the community for an average of 17 years, and perceived safe in the community most of time.

In terms of health status, the average respondents rated their general health "good" and their social well-being "very good." Their average age was 75 years old and 64.5% of them were female. Non-Hispanic white accounted for 85% of the sample, compared to 11% Hispanic/Latino and 2% African American. A majority (24%) of the seniors got high school diploma or equivalent, and had an annual household income of \$30,000 to \$49,999 (24%). Most of the seniors (86%) were not working. Close to half of them were married (48%) and only a fraction of them (2.4%) had grandchild under 18 living in house.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (N=2,276)

Variables	Mean (St.D.)/%	Measurements
Volunteering	47.6%	
<i>Independent Variables</i>		
Formal social networks	2.0(1.4)	
Informal social networks	2.6(0.7)	
Social interaction	3.6(2.1)	
Informal help	2.8(1.8)	
Years in the community	16.8(14.5)	
Perceived safety in the community	3.7(0.6)	
Health	3.2(1.1)	Self reported health status. 1: poor health; 5: excellent health
Mental Health	3.7(1.0)	1: poor sense of well-being; 5:

		excellent sense of well-being
Age	74.5(7.0)	Ranging from 65 to 102
Female	64.5%	1: female; 0: male
Race/ethnicity:		A 6-category variable, Hispanic or Latino is the comparison group
Hispanic/Latino	10.8%	
Non-Hispanic White	84.8%	
African American	2.1%	
Asian Pacific Islander	0.6%	
Native American	1.6%	
Other	0.1%	
Education:		The highest grade of education completed.
No high school diploma	11.5%	
High school diploma/equivalent	24.3%	
Graduated from a trade school	8.2%	
Graduated from a 2-year college	14.5%	
Attended a 4-year college	11.7%	
Graduated from a 4-year college	15.3%	
Earned a post-graduate degree	14.5%	
Income:		The annual household income before tax from all sources in 2009
Less than \$11,000	9.5%	
\$11,000-\$19,999	17.7%	
\$20,000-\$29,999	16.5%	
\$30,000-\$49,999	23.6%	
\$50,000-\$74,999	16.7%	
\$75,000-\$99,999	7.3%	
\$100,000 or more	8.8%	
Employment:		Not working is the comparison group
Not working	85.5%	
Work Part-time	8.7%	
Work Full-time	5.8%	
Married	47.6%	1: married or living with a partner; 0 otherwise
Grandchild under 18 in house	2.4%	1: yes; 0: no

Table 2 displays the results of the model. Overall, the model fits well ($\chi^2=288.26$, $p<.001$) and it explains about 22% of the variance of the likelihood of volunteering among older adults.

Table 2: Logistic regression of senior volunteering in Arizona (N=2,276)

Variables	β (St.E.)	Odds Ratio
Intercept	-4.80(1.10)	--
Formal social networks	.58(.07)***	1.78
Informal social networks	.41(.13)**	1.51
Social interaction	-.00(.04)	1.00
Informal help	.25(.05)***	1.28
Years in the community	.00(.01)	1.00

Perceived safety in the community	-.17(.15)	.84
Health	.23(.08)**	1.26
Mental Health	-.05(.10)	.95
Age	.00(.01)	1.00
Female	-.20(.17)	.82
Non-Hispanic White	.55(.32)	1.74
African American	1.19(.58)*	3.30
Asian, Pacific Islander or Native	.20(1.10)	1.22
Native American or American Indian	.19(.69)	1.21
Other	2.11(2.62)	8.22
Education	.20(.04)***	1.22
Income	.08(.06)	1.08
Work Part-time	.14(.26)	1.15
Work Full-time	.46(.34)	1.59
Married	.25(.18)	1.29
Grandchild under 18 living in house	.25(.44)	1.29
-2 log-likelihood	1,810.83	
Pseudo R ²	22.05%	

*Significant at *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001 on a one-tail test*

As expected, seniors who participate in more social clubs, religious or other organizations significantly increase their chances of volunteering ($\beta=.58$, $p<.001$; OR=1.78). Those with more friends or someone they can depend on are also much more likely to volunteer ($\beta=.41$, $p<.01$; OR=1.51). An additional friend could increase the chance of senior volunteering by 51%. Older adults who help friends or neighbors frequently are more likely to volunteer for formal organizations as well ($\beta=.25$, $p<.001$; OR=1.28). Surprisingly, the number of years lived in a community and the perceived safety in a community does not increase seniors' chance of volunteering. Additional, older adults who spend more time with friends are not more likely to volunteer either.

Seniors who rated themselves healthier are more likely to volunteer for organizations ($\beta=.23$, $p<.01$; OR=1.26). However, the perceived sense of well-being does not have significant impact on their likelihood of formal volunteering.

In terms of socioeconomic status, the results show that higher levels of education significantly increase seniors' chance of formal volunteering ($\beta=.20$, $p<.001$; OR=1.22). Additionally, African American seniors are twice more likely to volunteer for formal organizations compared to their Hispanic counterpart ($\beta=1.19$, $p<.05$; OR=3.30). Age, gender, income, employment status, marital status, and children in household do not seem to affect senior's chance of formal volunteering.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence of the influence of social context on senior volunteerism. Both formal and informal social networks are important correlates of seniors' propensity to volunteer which support the findings of Brown and Ferris (2007). The overall strength of an individual's associational social networks on increasing volunteering behavior was also apparent in this study. The findings are also consistent with what Einolf and Chambre (2011) find in their study, particularly regarding the role of information for social networks. Additionally, our results show that perceived safety in a community does not influence seniors' likelihood to volunteer and this is consistent with the findings of Einolf and Chambre's study as well. These findings raise questions on what social context factors we need to consider to examine the determinants of seniors' decision to volunteer.

This study also advances our understanding of seniors' volunteering decision. For nonprofit organizations, governments, and community groups that are interested in recruiting older Americans in Arizona, seeking seniors from local associations or through social networks are more likely to be fruitful. Additionally, current volunteers can seek out friends and neighbors who are always ready to help others, but who are not connected with organizations. The results suggest that marketing to African Americans connected to established social networks will more likely produce volunteers for nonprofit organizations. The use of facebook, Twitter and other social media might be a cost-effective recruitment strategy for local nonprofits. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) report that the use of "microblogging" services such as Twitter is offering nonprofit organizations unlimited opportunities to communicate with and engage the public for everyone's benefit.

One limitation of this study is that we cannot separate seniors' involvement with religious organizations from other types of organizations. Although our results show that participation in meetings of social clubs, religious and other organizations increases seniors' propensity to volunteer, it would provide more insight if we can examine religious involvement separately from secular organizations' involvement.

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The authors would like to thank St. Luke's Health Initiatives for providing the data of this study.

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