

The “Why” of Older Volunteers: Do Employment and Loss of Spouse Influence the Motivation of Older Volunteers?

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Abstract

Volunteering by the elderly can be seen as productive aging. Older volunteers can offer unique assets to organizations and society through their knowledge and expertise. Volunteer resource managers and volunteer program administrators widely acknowledge this valuable pool of volunteers. Recruiting and retaining these volunteers requires knowledge about their reasons for volunteering. In other words, what motivates older people to volunteer? This European-based study suggests strong similarities in the motivation of older volunteers from Europe and North America and two interesting moderators in the motivation of older volunteers: 1) employment/retirement and 2) loss of spouse. Given the similarities between their motivational patterns, the results have implications for the recruitment and retention of older volunteers on both continents.

Key Words:

motivation, older, volunteers, Volunteer Function Inventory

Introduction

Many older people (50+) have accumulated a lifetime of skills and knowledge that could enrich their lives after retirement (Musick & Wilson, 2008). One possibility is through volunteering. Volunteering by older people is often

considered in terms of increases in the number of volunteering hours, given the less demanding schedules of retired people. Bass and Caro (2001, p. 40) describe volunteering by older people as a form of productive aging, as it “produces socially valued goods

and services or that develops the capacity to produce those goods and services.”

One cannot assume that retirees and older people will take up volunteering. A “life of leisure” (Moen, Fields, Meador, & Rosenblatt, 2000, p. 249) is apparently an important element in the current ideal retirement life-style. Although the potential for volunteering after retirement is high, it does not always occur in practice. Musick and Wilson (2008) found that older people become less likely to volunteer and that they volunteer for fewer organizations, although they are likely to increase the time they contribute to each organization.

As volunteers age, life experiences (Safrit, Scheer, & King, 2001) can lead to changes in their motivation to volunteer. The literature is inconsistent with regard to the definition of the “older volunteer.” This study defines “older volunteers” as above the age of 55, with those older than 65 considered as “retirees,” consistent with the most common age for retirement in the Netherlands.

This article makes three contributions to the current literature. First, it adds a European perspective to the extensive body of Anglo-Saxon research on the motivation to volunteer, with a particular focus on older volunteers. Second, it addresses the knowledge gap identified by Petriwskyj and Warburton (2007) regarding older volunteers, despite their importance for volunteer program administrators and volunteer resource managers. Third, this research considers two possible moderators with regard to the motivation of older volunteers: 1) loss of spouse and 2) employment (as opposed to retirement). Several studies have examined the association between loss of spouse and informal social interaction and other forms of social engagement (Brown, House, Brown, & Smith, 2006; Umberson, Wartman, & Kessler, 1992). Far less

attention has been specifically focused on volunteer participation (Utz, Carr, Nesse, & Wortman 2002). There is no historical evidence that retirement is associated with higher rates of volunteering (Caro & Bass, 1997) or that it affects the motivation to volunteer.

This study presents the motives of older volunteers within a European context, identifying moderators that could influence their motivation. These results are used to derive implications for recruitment and retention strategies.

Motivation to Volunteer

Recruiting new volunteers and retaining their commitment requires an understanding of why people volunteer. Existing approaches to the study of volunteer motivation include the volunteer process model (Otomo & Snyder, 2002), the role/identity model (Grube & Piliavin, 2000), the psychological contract approach (Liao-Troth, 2005), and the functional approach (Clary et al., 1998). This article is based primarily on the functional approach, which identifies personal and social functions that can be served by volunteering: values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement. This model assumes that all people have the same basic psychological needs (see Table 1).

Many studies have indicated that there are various factors motivating older people to volunteer. Most research on motivation (and specifically on older volunteers) has been conducted in North America. Musick and Wilson (2008) implied that older volunteers are more motivated by religious beliefs and values and by the desire to remain busy and productive, to maintain faculties and skills, and to feel needed by others. Retired volunteers (65+) mention the desire to stay busy, healthy, and active as primary reasons for volunteering (Ilsley, 1990; Lee & Burden, 1991; O'Reilly &

Caro, 1994). The findings of Musick and Wilson are largely consistent with those of Okun, Barr, and Hertzog (1998), who administered the Volunteer Function Inventory (VFI) to a sample of active volunteers above the age of 50 and found that they were most likely to be motivated by Values, Understanding, and Enhancement. Older volunteers thus seek to help others, learn about themselves and the world in which they live, and feel useful and good about themselves. Few mention the need to alleviate loneliness (Moen et al., 2000). Retired people do not necessarily feel a lack of friends or social contacts. In fact, older people who volunteer are just as likely as young people are to start volunteering in order to establish new social contacts (Musick & Wilson).

From an organizational point of view, it is important to know which motives should be addressed in order to attract the right people for specific volunteer assignments (Musick & Wilson, 2008). Only if a volunteer's motivation, capabilities, and expectations match the job description will it be possible to maintain (or increase) loyalty and commitment. Volunteer satisfaction and retention are also related to motivation, as human behavior is motivated by certain goals and needs (Finkelstein, 2007; Karr & Meijs, 2006). Research suggests that the recruitment and retention of older volunteers requires respect for their expertise and capabilities (Nagchoudhuri, Moore McBride, Thirupathy, Morrow-Howell, & Tang, 2005; Okun et al., 1998).

Moderating the Motivation of Older Volunteers

This article specifically considers two potential moderators for the motivation of older volunteers. The first involves the loss of spouse, whether by divorce or death. The few studies to examine the relationship between loss of spouse and volunteering

show that, although volunteer participation may mitigate the negative impact of widowhood on personal well-being, those who have recently lost a spouse are unlikely to change their volunteering behavior (Utz et al., 2002; Wheaton, 1985). Musick and Wilson (2008) mentioned several theories that may predict the impact of volunteering on people's lives following such a loss. Role loss theory (Chambré, 1984) predicted that married people who experience the death of a spouse seek ways to replace the marital role in their lives, possibly by volunteering. Activity theory (Lemon, Bengtson, & Peterson, 1972) argues that, as social roles become less available, people replace lost roles with new ones in order to preserve their self-identity. Disengagement theory (Achenbaum & Bengtson, 1994) proposes that older people disengage from social activities as they lose roles. Continuity theory (Atchley, 1989) argues that, in old age, people tend to continue whatever level of activity they enjoyed in middle age. Although these theories could explain changes in the motivation of older volunteers, less is known about the influence of widowhood on motivation. Musick and Wilson (2008) further argued that the results of the few studies conducted on this subject are not representative enough to predict the consequences of spousal loss on volunteering.

The second moderator involves the transition from employment to retirement. Research on older volunteers and the effect of employment or retirement has focused on the likelihood of volunteering and the number of hours contributed (Broese van Groenou & Van Tilburg, 2010; Caro & Bass, 1997; Choi, 2003). Musick and Wilson (2008) argued that employed people are generally more likely to volunteer, although they make no statement about the possible moderating effect of employment and retirement on the motivation to volunteer.

Few studies have linked the motivation to volunteer to life-stage changes concerning employment and retirement for older volunteers. This relationship is analyzed further in the following sections.

Methodology

Musick and Wilson (2008, p. 56) stated that “the best-known and most sophisticated psychological theory of volunteer motivations takes on the functional approach [...] which is concerned with the reasons and purposes that underlie and generate beliefs and actions.” The well-known Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), which is based on this approach (Clary et al., 1998), was used in this study. The VFI has been validated, applied, and adapted in various studies in different countries and contexts (Okun et al., 1998; Greenslade & White, 2005). The VFI assesses each of the six functions as primary motives for volunteering (Clary et al., 1998). The inventory comprises five items for each motivational function. Each item consists of a proposition that can be ranked on a Likert scale from 1 (“not at all important”) to 7 (“extremely important”).

The research sample was homogeneous, consisting of Dutch respondents within the same age group (55+) and similar social-economic status. All were volunteering for the same organization and performing one of three types of tasks. This allowed the analysis of relationships between personal characteristics and motivation to volunteer. Multivariate analysis was conducted with SPSS. Because the VFI has been validated multiple times (Clary et al., 1998), no factor or reliability analyses were conducted.

Data collection, which was part of the master’s thesis research of the second author, was conducted within the national association De Zonnebloem, one of the largest volunteer organizations in the Netherlands. De Zonnebloem has about

41,000 volunteers, organized in 1200 local chapters in 550 municipalities. Their main activities involve visiting and providing activities for people with physical disabilities due to illness, handicap, or age (see www.zonnebloem.nl).

The online survey was distributed through an e-mail link in order to reach a large and geographically dispersed sample, as well as to reduce costs and save time (Couper, 2001). The questionnaire was sent to all 4,830 volunteers above the age of 50 from whom the email address was known. The questionnaire was returned by 1,484 (31%) respondents, 1,289 (27%) of which were complete.

Results

All respondents were 55 years of age or older. The average age for the sample was 63 years. Most of the respondents (72.5%) were female. The average time spent volunteering was 16.32 hours per month. This is consistent with the average hours per volunteer in the Netherlands (CBS, 2009). The majority of the respondents (77%) were Christian, with Roman Catholics as the largest group (56.8%). Most of the respondents were active churchgoers, with 34.5% attending services at least once a month. Only 27.9% indicated that they never go to church. The majority (49.7%) had completed only secondary school, while 22.3% had completed advanced vocational degrees, and 28% had completed university or professional degrees. About one fourth (23.2%) of the respondents were employed, and 76.8% were retired. A large majority of respondents (78.9%) were married, while 4.8% were divorced, 9.5% were widowed, 3.5% were cohabiting, and 3.3% were single.

The results (see Table 2) indicate that, in general, the respondents were motivated by Values (5.76), Enhancement (4.24), and Understanding (4.68). The Social (3.02),

Protective (2.99), and Career (2.27) functions appeared less important as reasons for volunteering. This corresponds to the three most important motivations of older volunteers in North America (Musick & Wilson, 2008).

The Effect of Employment and Loss of Spouse

As observed above, the motivations of older volunteers in Europe are similar to those of older volunteers in North America, although few studies have investigated on moderators that can influence motivation. We analyzed the effects of being employed or retired and loss of spouse on the motivation to volunteer. First, we constructed a correlation matrix to examine relationships between the variables. Employment is negatively correlated with the Career ($P < 0.01$), Enhancement ($P < 0.05$), and Understanding ($P < 0.01$) functions. Loss of spouse is positively correlated with the Protective ($P < 0.01$) function. There is no significant correlation between loss of spouse and employment. Multivariate analysis for the dependent variables seem not to be appropriate since the correlation between the dependent variables is low. The interaction between the independent variables was not considered in further analyses.

The results of the multivariate analysis show that employed people had significantly higher scores than retirees did on the Career ($df=1$; $F=39.260$; $P < 0.01$; $R^2=0.053$) and Understanding ($df=1$; $F=8.118$; $P < 0.01$; $R^2=0.013$) functions. The R^2 indicates that the Employment function has a stronger influence on the Career function than it does on the Understanding function (Table 3).

Results from the analysis show that people who had experienced the loss of a spouse (whether through divorce or death) scored significantly higher than other

respondents did on the Protective function ($df=1$; $F=18.788$; $P < 0.01$; $R^2=0.021$). People who had experienced the loss of a spouse scored significantly higher (3.41) than did respondents who were still married (2.92; see Table 4).

Discussion

Consistent with the findings of Musick and Wilson (2008) concerning older volunteers in North America, this European sample scored high on Values, Understanding, and Enhancement (see also Okun et al., 1998). This suggests that the literature and general findings are applicable across multiple countries and contexts. Our findings provide more detail concerning two specific moderators: employment (vs. retirement) and loss of spouse. The data indicate that these moderators influence the functional motivation of older volunteers, although there is no interaction between the two.

First, employed people are slightly more motivated by career-related experience when they volunteer, even if they are older than 55. This outcome is surprising, given that most people in this age group are nearing retirement age. Strong incentives to develop or invest in their careers would seem less relevant for this group. In comparison to those who are retired, older volunteers who are employed are also more likely to seek opportunities to expand their knowledge about the world and to exercise infrequently applied skills. Pre-retirement volunteering seems to be driven by the motivation to express knowledge, skills, and expertise while learning more about the world.

Second, our results show that the loss of a spouse (whether through divorce or death) affects the motivation of older volunteers. Older volunteers who have lost a spouse scored higher on the Protective function. This suggests that volunteering offers a

significant opportunity to reduce negative feelings and address personal problems following the loss of a spouse, although the absolute values of the scores are not very high for either group (2.92 and 3.42, respectively). Musick and Wilson (2008) argued that more factors should be considered when analyzing the relationship between volunteering and the loss of a spouse. The other factors they suggest include the age at which the loss was experienced, the volunteer activity of the former spouse, the type of volunteering and, most likely, the nature of the marital relationship. Although our data do not allow the consideration of these factors into account, these factors might explain the absence of substantial absolute differences between the two groups.

Conclusions and Implications for the Profession

Older volunteers can be a very productive group, as they can produce or develop capacity for socially valued goods and services (Bass & Caro, 2001). The effective management of older volunteers requires knowledge about their motivation (Clary et al., 1998). Organizations should consider motivational factors when recruiting and retaining volunteers. Discrepancies between the motivation of volunteers and the actual volunteering situation can lead to high turnover, which can be costly for the organization. Older volunteers clearly wish to use their volunteering to express or act on their values (Values), grow and develop psychologically (Enhancement), and learn more about the world or exercise skills that have been unused (Understanding). These appear to be *the main* motivators for older volunteers in both North American and Europe.

More interestingly, because the motivation of older volunteers is apparently consistent across geographic contexts, the

factors that moderate their motivation are likely to be similarly consistent. Volunteer program administrators and volunteer resource managers should therefore consider the life stage and circumstances of their existing and potential volunteers. Evidence indicates that both employment and the loss of a spouse influence the motivation of older volunteers. The literature suggests that these factors affect both the likelihood of volunteering and the number of hours contributed. This study has shown that these factors can also affect the functional motivation to volunteer. In the recruitment and retention of older volunteers, organizations should try to focus on the types of opportunities these volunteers seek, and volunteer assignments should be aligned with the capabilities and availability of the volunteer (Meijs & Brudney, 2007).

Our results suggest that older volunteers who are still employed are more likely than their retired counterparts are to respond to opportunities to gain career-related experience, expand their knowledge about the world, to exercise infrequently applied skills. For example, our findings suggest that accountants who volunteer are not necessarily interested in performing bookkeeping tasks. Depending upon their individual interests and capabilities, such volunteers might be highly motivated to accept positions in public relations, adult development, or other areas.

Older volunteers who have lost a spouse are more likely to respond to opportunities to reduce negative feelings and address their own problems (Protective). These volunteers could be placed in assignments that help them to feel better about themselves. Organizations should therefore focus on acknowledging the expertise and capabilities of older volunteers, as suggested by (Nagchoudhuri et al., 2005). As in all contexts, the effective management of older volunteers requires describing and designing

volunteer assignments to meet the expectations, needs, capabilities, and availability of individual volunteers.

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Table 1

Voluntary Functions Inventory

Function	Conceptual Definition
Values	Volunteering in order to express or act on important values (e.g., humanitarianism)
Understanding	Volunteering in order to learn more about the world or to exercise skills that are often unused
Social	Volunteering in order to strengthen social relationships
Career	Volunteering in order to gain career-related experience
Protective	Volunteering in order to reduce negative feelings (e.g., guilt) or to address personal problems
Enhancement	Volunteering in order to achieve psychological growth and development

Source: Clary et al. (1998)

Table 2

General Outcomes of the Motivation to Volunteer

Variable	N	Mean	Sd
Career	1289	2.27	1.30
Social	1289	3.02	1.34
Values	1289	5.76	0.72
Enhancement	1289	4.24	1.20
Protective	1289	2.99	1.21
Understanding	1289	4.68	1.17

Table 3

Moderation of Motives Due to Employment/Retirement

Variable	N		Mean		SD	
	Employed	Retired	Employed	Retired	Employed	Retired
Career**	268	885	2.79	2.09	1.40	1.20
Social	268	885	3.01	3.03	1.35	1.32
Values	268	885	5.81	5.76	0.67	0.71
Enhancement	268	885	4.35	4.20	1.13	1.22
Protective	268	885	3.01	2.97	1.22	1.21
Understanding**	268	885	4.91	4.58	1.09	1.18

**Significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 4

Moderation of Motives Caused by Loss of Spouse

Variable	N		Mean		Sd	
	Married	Wid/divorced	Married	Wid/divorced	Married	Wid/divorced
Career	1001	181	2.25	2.39	1.28	1.32
Social	1001	181	3.01	3.11	1.34	1.28
Values	1001	181	5.79	5.74	0.67	0.75
Enhancement	1001	181	4.23	4.39	1.20	1.21
Protective**	1001	181	2.92	3.41	1.19	1.25
Understanding	1001	181	4.69	4.77	1.16	1.06

**Significant at the 0.01 level.

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