

ABSTRACT

This study examined age differences in the volunteer experience, frequency of participation, and motivation for serving among a sample of volunteers ranging in age from 18 to 87. Age differences emerged regarding the type of volunteer experience and frequency of service. Older volunteers were more likely than younger ones to report performing clerical duties and interacting primarily with people their own age. Altruistic motives propel volunteers of all ages to serve, but older adults emphasized the need to stay active or fill their days.

Age Differences in Volunteer Participation

Beverly Black and Ronald L. Jirovic

Numerous studies in the literature address aspects related to the motivations of volunteers, descriptions of volunteer experiences and activities, and frequency of volunteer service (Clary, Snyder, and Stukas, 1996; O'Reilly and Caro, 1994; Thomas and Finch, 1990). Many studies examine them among older adults especially those over 65 (Caro and Bass, 1995; Chambré, 1984, 1993; Stevens, 1991). However, few studies discuss these aspects of the volunteer experience in relationship to age differences among volunteers (Herzog, *et al.*, 1989). This study examines age differences in the type of volunteer experience, frequency of volunteer service, and motivations for volunteering.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Type of Volunteer Experience

Generally, adults of all ages perform similar volunteer activities and contribute most of their time working directly with other people (O'Reilly and Caro, 1994). However, there is some growing evidence that the volunteer experience may differ somewhat for older and younger adults. Older adults may focus more of their volunteer activities on clerical tasks and fund raising than younger adults (Black and Kovacs, *in press*, 1998; Lee and Burden, 1991). Older women are more likely to

perform activities related to traditional gender roles, such as preparing for or cleaning up after a social event (Fischer, Mueller, and Cooper, 1991). Low-income older adults tend to carry out a limited range of volunteer roles concentrating in areas such as delivery of meals, helping with personal care, or providing support services such as telephone reassurance (Jirovec and Hyduk, *in press*). Additionally, older adults spend the largest number of their volunteer hours in church-related service (Fischer, *et al.*, 1991; O'Reilly and Caro, 1994).

The nature of the interpersonal contact involved in the volunteer experience may also vary by age. Older adults are more likely to be segregated into activities involving other older adults (Fischer, *et al.*, 1991; O'Reilly and Caro, 1994) which may lead to lower levels of contentment with their volunteer experience (Jirovec and Hyduk, *in press*; Strom and Strom, 1994).

Frequency and Regularity of Volunteer Service

Older adults have historically volunteered in smaller percentages than adults in youth to middle age (Caro and Bass, 1995; Clary, Snyder and Stukas, 1996). However, Chambré (1993) suggests that

Beverly Black's doctoral dissertation and much of her subsequent research focuses upon volunteerism. She served as a member of the faculty at Texas Christian University and Florida International University and currently teaches in the area of human behavior in the School of Social Work at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. *Ronald L. Jirovec* is an associate professor within the School of Social Work and a faculty associate of the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University in Detroit. His research interests include welfare reform, political and senior center participation among the elderly, and formal volunteerism. His most recent work focuses on volunteerism and health among older adults.

senior volunteering is on the rise. Chambré estimates that approximately 40 percent of seniors volunteer today compared to only 10-20 percent in the 1960s and 1970s and partially attributes this increase to the rising affluence and educational levels of the aged.

Although more older adults are volunteering and may be donating time to more than one agency or organization, they may not be volunteering large amounts of time (Fischer, *et al.*, 1991). A study examining the volunteer activities of older Minnesotans found that the mean amount of time spent in volunteering was about three hours weekly. Fewer than 10 percent contributed as many as 10 hours per week (Fischer, *et al.*, 1991). Other studies also suggest that older adults may be volunteering only 70-80 hours of their time annually, or approximately six hours per month (Herzog, *et al.*, 1989; Herzog and Morgan, 1993).

Motivations

Volunteers most often cite altruism when asked their reason for volunteering. Researchers, however, concur that multiple motives propel people to volunteer (Smith, 1982). Literature investigating volunteer motivation classifies motives into models ranging from two to six categories (Clary, Synder, and Stukas, 1996; Gidron, 1984; Morrow-Howell and Mui, 1989).

One prominent two-category model of volunteer motivations distinguishes between egoistic and altruistic motives (Horton-Smith, 1981). Three category models of motivation (Morrow-Howell and Mui, 1989) often add a social motive category (e.g., feeling lonely). Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen (1991) contend that none of the category models of volunteer motivation sufficiently explain the reasons why people volunteer. They argue that motives for volunteering constitute an unidimensional phenomenon—a phenomenon which possesses only one basic concept or experience. The phenomenon encompasses both altruism and egoism; it

does not distinguish between them. Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen state that volunteers act not from a single motive or a category of motives but from a combination of motives that can be described overall as a “rewarding experience.”

Although the desire to help may be a prevalent motivation of volunteers for all ages (Fischer and Schaffer, 1993, Smith, 1982), Morrow-Howe and Mui (1989) suggested that it may be even more common among older volunteers. Several studies (Cohen-Mansfield, 1989; Kuehne and Sears, 1993; O'Reilly and Caro, 1994) have identified altruism as one of the primary reasons that older adults seek out volunteer activities. Gillespie and King's (1985) study of Red Cross volunteers found that nearly twice as many volunteers over the age of 65, compared to those aged 18-25, reported “helping others” as a motivation for volunteering. In contrast to this finding, only 1.3 percent of those over age 65 compared to 31 percent of the 18-25 year olds reported “to obtain job training and skills” as a motivation to volunteer.

The literature consistently identifies one important difference between the motivations of older and younger volunteers on the issue of time. Older volunteers are more likely than younger volunteers to see volunteering as filling a need for activity and they are more likely to report that they volunteer because they have time or want to keep busy and active (Fischer, *et al.*, 1991). Lee and Burden's (1991) study of the volunteering activities of seniors found that the greatest percentage of volunteers (36.7 percent) reported that they were motivated to serve because they needed “something to do.”

In summary, there is little literature addressing aspects of the volunteer experience in relationship to age differences among volunteers. Preliminary findings on age differences among volunteers suggest that older and younger adults may differ in the type of volunteer experience they have, frequency of their service, and in some of their expressed motivations for serving.

THE STUDY

Our review of the general volunteer literature and, more specifically, the literature on volunteerism among older adults and age differences among volunteers, led us to pose the following research questions. How does the volunteer experience differ for younger and older adults? How does the frequency of volunteer service differ for younger and older adults? And how do the motivations to serve as volunteers differ for younger and older adults?

Sample

With the cooperation of the respective executive directors, participants were drawn from the volunteer lists of Community Services of Oakland (CSO) and Oakland County Mobile Meals (OCMM). Both agencies are located in the Detroit metropolitan areas of southeastern Michigan. CSO is similar to a settlement house, serving the concrete and counseling needs of primarily low-income clientele. CSO has approximately 20 staff persons and 75-90 volunteers. OCMM primarily delivers food boxes to low-income families and serves as a congregate nutrition site for older adults. It operates with a small staff of two to three full-time employees and relies heavily on its 100-150 volunteers to assemble, serve, and transport meals.

Of the 54 volunteers from OCMM asked to participate in the study, 51 agreed and were personally interviewed about their volunteer experience at OCMM. Due to the difficulty of having personal access to volunteers at CSO, 83 volunteers at CSO were mailed a survey version of questions about their volunteer experience. Questionnaires were returned by 43 of these volunteers for a response rate of 52 percent. Verbal and/or written informed consent was secured from all subjects.

The 94 participants in the sample ranged from 18-87 years of age. Participants were primarily female (57 percent/94 percent), white (91 percent/94 per-

cent), high school graduates (mean years of education=14.5), married (53 percent/94 percent) and reported a wide range of income levels. Moreover, sample participants were in sound physical and emotional health.

Measurement

The questionnaire was based on a protocol developed and pre-tested by Jirovec and Hyduk (in press). Formal volunteer activities were assessed via 21 "yes-no" items designed to tap the qualitative (e.g., motivation, previous experiences, type of volunteer activity) as well as the quantitative aspects of volunteer participation (e.g., frequency of volunteer participation, number of hours donated, number of organizations for which the respondent volunteered). In total, the protocol contained 40 items and required approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Eleven demographic questions assessed age, gender, race, marital status, education, work status, living arrangements, home ownership, transportation, income, and level of social interaction. Level of social interaction was measured by determining the number of close friends or relatives living in one's neighborhood who could be considered confidants. Physical health was measured in terms of illness (e.g., number of housebound days, number of days spent in the hospital in the past year), as well as functional capacity (e.g., number of neighborhood walks taken per week). The short version of Bloom and Blenkner's (1970) contentment scale was utilized to measure psychological well-being among our respondents. Findings related to the physical and psychological well-being are reported in Jirovec and Hyduck (in press).

RESULTS

Analyses examined age differences among volunteers. *T*-tests, a common statistical test used to compare the averages (means) of two groups, were used to analyze mean age differences in type of volunteer experience, regularity of volunteer

service, and motivations for serving. Results of the *t*-tests reveal how likely the differences in the averages (means) between the two groups could have occurred by chance. One-way ANOVA and post-hoc analyses were used to determine if the mean ages differed among volunteers performing various frequencies of volunteer service. ANOVA is a statistical test used to compare the averages (means) of three or more groups. Post-hoc analyses is a statistical procedure used following an ANOVA to determine which of the group averages (means) differed from one another. The number of responses varies

among analyses due to participant omission on specific items

Type of Volunteer Experience

Aspects of the volunteer experience varied significantly by age. Table I describes the number and mean age of volunteers who reported that certain activities were or were not a part of their volunteer experience. Older volunteers were more likely to report that their volunteer experience entailed office or clerical work. Volunteers who reported that their activities usually involved clerical work had a mean age of 68.9 compared to

TABLE I
Age Differences in Type of Volunteer Experience
Volunteer Responses (n=94)

Volunteer Experience	YES			NO		
	mean age	number	standard deviation**	mean age	number	standard deviation**
Efforts were recognized by the organization	62.2	81	17.0	56.5	10	19.1
Volunteering was what expected it to be	60.9	87	17.1	77.7	3	6.7
Activities usually involve office or clerical work	68.9*	24	10.2	58.4*	67	18.6
Activities typically involve personal contact with people	60.9	90	17.3	57.5	2	20.5
Work involves personal contact with people of own age	69.7*	45	14.8	52.7*	46	15.6
Work involves personal contact with people from different generations	56.6*	66	16.4	71.9*	26	14.8
Reimbursed for expenses associated with volunteer work	64.4	16	16.4	60.4	77	17.5
Provide own transportation for volunteer work	60.9	88	7.3	65.0	5	18.9

**p*<.05 (There is only a 5% probability that findings of significant differences could be explained by chance.)

**Standard deviation measures how widely or narrowly the numbers are spread out around the average.

a mean age of 58.4 for volunteers reporting that their volunteer work did not usually involve clerical work. Age differences were significant.

Volunteers did not differ by age in their assessment that their volunteer experience typically involved personal contact with people. All but two volunteers stated that their volunteer activities involved contact with people. However, volunteers reported differences by age in the nature of the personal contact with people. Age differences were significant among volunteers responding to two items on the questionnaire related to the intergenerational nature of their volunteer experience. Volunteers responding to a question asking if their volunteer activities involved personal contact with people of their own age were significantly older than those stating this was not the case. When asked if "work involves personal contact with people younger or older than yourselves (people from different generations)," volunteers who agreed with this statement were significantly younger than volunteers who disagreed with the

statement.

No age differences emerged among volunteers in regard to their expectations of the volunteer work, the recognition they received from the organization, reimbursements for expenses, or provision of their own transportation.

Frequency and Regularity of Volunteer Experience

Volunteers differed by age when assessing if they volunteered "just occasionally, whenever they had spare time." Volunteers stating they volunteered just occasionally had a mean age of 48.5. Volunteers stating that they did not volunteer just occasionally, whenever they had spare time, had a mean age of 63.7. This age difference was significant

Table II reports frequency of volunteer service by age differences. Volunteers who stated they served on a regular basis had a mean age of 62.2 compared to a mean age of 36.8 for those who did not serve on a regular basis. Although this is a large age difference, the small number of persons stating they did not volunteer on

TABLE II
Mean Age in Volunteer Responses for Frequency of Service

Volunteer Experience	YES			NO		
	mean age	number	standard deviation**	mean age	number	standard deviation**
Volunteer just occasionally, whenever have spare time	48.5*	16	22.6	63.7*	77	15.0
Volunteer on a regular basis, requiring an on-going commitment throughout the year	62.2	89	16.5	36.8	4	20.8
Volunteered for two or more organizations in the past 12 months	61.0	65	17.2	61.4	28	17.9

* $p < .05$ (There is only a 5% probability that findings of significant differences could be explained by chance.)

**Standard deviation measures how widely or narrowly the numbers are spread out around the average.

a regular basis most likely precluded a finding of significant differences. No age differences were found among volunteers who volunteered for two or more organizations in the previous 12 months.

Volunteers also estimated the number of volunteer hours they gave each month over the previous year (see Table III). Volunteers differed significantly by age. The post-hoc statistical analysis used to compare the mean ages indicated that only volunteers who performed 1-5 hours of service each month were significantly younger than volunteers who performed over 20 hours of service each month.

TABLE III
Mean Ages in Hours of Volunteer Service Performed per Month in Previous Year

Volunteer Age (n=94)			
Hours of Service Performed	mean age	number	standard deviation**
1-5	49.0*	20	18.2
6-10	58.8	18	19.7
11-15	62.5	16	13.8
16-20	56.9	10	16.9
over 20	71.6*	29	10.2

* $p < .01$ (There is only a 1% probability that findings of significant differences could be explained by chance.)

**Standard deviation measures how widely or narrowly the numbers are spread out around the average.

Expressed Motivations for Volunteering

Table IV (on page 44) reports mean ages for the various expressed motivations (i.e., reasons) for volunteering. The expressed motives for volunteering were similar. Similarity in motivations spanned both altruistic and egoistic motives. The greatest number of volunteers (n=88) cited the altruistic reason (a way of giving back to community) as influencing their decision to volunteer. Fewer numbers of volunteers reported the egoistic motive (in order to learn something new) as influencing their decision to volunteer. This less influential motive was comparable across ages.

Volunteers significantly differed by age with regard to an item that assessed vol-

unteering as a way "to keep busy or stay active." Older adults expressed this motive for volunteering more frequently than younger adults in our study.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that the volunteer experiences of older adults and younger adults vary in important ways. Age appears to influence not only the type of volunteer activity performed, but also the nature of the personal contact experienced while volunteering. Older volunteers in this study were more likely to report performing activities that involved clerical duties. They were also more likely to report interacting with people of their own age. These findings support previous research suggesting older volunteers are more apt to perform nondirect client services than younger volunteers (Black and Kovacs, 1998) and are more likely to experience age segregation in their volunteer service than younger volunteers (Fischer, *et al.*, 1991; O'Reilly and Caro, 1994).

The finding that the volunteer experience differs by age should not necessarily be viewed as harmful or undesirable. Interests of volunteers differ. Some volunteers find personal benefit in seemingly routine tasks. For some volunteers the balance between routine and meaningful tasks is critical to their satisfaction level. Research (Fisher and Cole, 1993; Ilsley, 1990) suggests that volunteers' satisfaction relates to tasks they perform, yet the exact relationship is different for each individual. Black and Kovacs (1996) also found that variation in the hospice volunteer experience (including the performance of routine clerical tasks versus direct client contact) did not necessarily associate with varying levels of volunteer satisfaction or volunteer retention.

The finding that age appeared to influence the type of experience a volunteer encountered suggests several questions for future study. Do older and younger adults choose different volunteer experiences? If so, what factors influence them

TABLE IV
Mean Ages in Volunteer Responses for Expressed Motivations
Volunteer Responses (n=94)

Reasons/ Motivations	YES			NO		
	mean age	number	standard deviation**	mean age	number	standard deviation**
A way of giving back to community	60.8	88	17.4	69.0	4	18.4
An expression of religious faith	61.4	52	16.7	60.7	40	18.5
In order to keep busy or stay active	66.4*	60	16.2	51.5*	33	15.2
In order to learn something new	58.2	43	17.5	63.6	50	16.9
Someone asked me to help out	61.2	42	19.9	61.2	50	17.9
Volunteered when younger	59.9	62	18.0	63.4	30	16.2

* $p < .05$ (There is only a 5% probability that findings of significant differences could be explained by chance.)

**Standard deviation measures how widely or narrowly the numbers are spread out around the average.

to make different choices? Do more older volunteers prefer routine tasks than younger volunteers? How does the relationship between task performed and level of volunteer satisfaction differ for older and younger volunteers? Perhaps, most importantly, we may need to ask if the differences in volunteer experiences are freely chosen or if the volunteer options available to older adults differ from those available to younger adults? Jirovec and Hyduk (in press) suggest that volunteer options may differ for adults of varying incomes, with few meaningful volunteer roles available to low-income adults. Do volunteer options also differ by age? How might the type of agency setting influence the volunteer options and experiences of younger and older persons? Further research will allow us to explore these important questions.

Older volunteers in this study were significantly more likely to have their contact limited to others of the same age than younger volunteers. The segregation of

older volunteers into activities that involve other older adults is supported in other studies (Fischer, *et al.*, 1991; O'Reilly and Caro, 1994). Research (Jirovec and Hyduk, in press) suggests that the nature of the contact volunteers experience with others while serving as volunteers may be even more influential on their level of satisfaction than the nature of the task. Thus, volunteer administrators may be well served by offering volunteers input into the nature of the personal contact desired while serving. If volunteers express a desire for a more age-diversified experience, mentorship programs linking older and younger volunteers or volunteer support groups could be offered to create more opportunities for increased contact across age spans.

The findings of the study relating to age difference in the regularity and frequency of volunteer service partially support previous research (Fischer, *et al.*, 1991; Jirovec and Hyduk, in press). Although no age differences emerged in the percep-

tion of the regularity of service and the amounts of time devoted to service, age differences emerged in the estimated number of volunteer hours served. Volunteer administrators may want to consider the relationship between hours served and the age of the volunteer when placing him or her. Further research can extend our knowledge about how the age of the volunteer interacts with organizational structure or organizational setting and how the volunteer's employment status influences his or her regularity and frequency of service.

Findings from this study also support previous studies (Fischer and Schaffer, 1993) suggesting that expressed motives are generally similar across volunteers of all ages, with one important exception. The desire to keep busy and active serves as a stronger motivator for volunteer service among older adults than younger adults (Fischer, *et al.*, 1991; Lee and Burden, 1991).

The findings in this study that altruistic motives espoused by volunteers similarly influenced those of all ages supports research suggesting that altruistic motives vary little by age (Independent Sector, 1990; Rouse and Clawson, 1992). One implication of this finding implies that volunteers of all ages want to feel that their experience is valuable and makes a contribution. The importance of this fact should be remembered when assigning tasks to volunteers across the life span. Recruitment efforts would be best served exploring altruistic motives with all potential audiences. When recruiting among older adults, emphasis also could be placed on the volunteer experience as an important way to keep active in the community. When recruiting among younger adults, emphasis could be placed on the volunteer experience as an important mechanism to gain work experience (Isley, 1990; Lee and Burden, 1991; O'Reilly and Caro, 1994).

One limitation of the study is the unequal numbers of younger and older volunteers who participated in the study.

The non-random sample was disproportionately white, female, and drawn from a most active subset of volunteers. The researchers did not analyze the volunteers not participating in the study and are unable to estimate the effect responses from non-participants could have had on the results. Therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing from the findings. In future studies addressing age variations, the sample should be stratified based on age. Another limitation of the study relates to the nature of the data collected. Volunteers reported "yes" and "no" responses to questions. In reality, many answers may have fallen somewhere in-between. Future research allowing for varying degrees of response may provide more information on motivations, types of volunteer activities performed, and the nature of the interpersonal contact experienced while volunteering.

Despite the limitations of this study, the findings provide further insight into the age differences of the volunteer experience. As traditional pools of volunteers continue to diminish, the importance of older adults as volunteers will continue to grow. Although increasing numbers of adult persons are volunteering today (Chambré, 1993), a substantial number discontinue serving within one year (Stevens, 1991). In order to gain more insight into this phenomenon, we need to better understand how age influences the nature of volunteer participation.

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