Chapter 21
Volunteering in Later Life: From Disengagement to Civic Engagement

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The topic of volunteering in later life has a long tradition in gerontology, perhaps because historically volunteering was one of the few formal roles available to older adults after leaving the workforce. Volunteer activity fit well with the "busy ethic" that shaped modern retirement (Ekerdt 1986) and was in line with the involvement promoted by activity theory (Havighurst 1963). Yet volunteering was considered a leisure activity (Musick and Wilson 2008), a discretionary role that might fill in for roles losses in employment and parenting. Recently, the discussion has changed, as an upsurge of academic and political interest in volunteering in later life begins to dominate the discourse on civic engagement.

There are several explanations for this change in perspective. First, dramatic gains in health, education, and longevity over the past half-century have increased individuals' capacity and desire for civic roles in later life. Second, the nonprofit sector and many government agencies are struggling to meet increasing demands with stagnant or decreasing resources. In this environment, volunteer labor has become crucial, and maximizing the deployment of older adults depends on knowledge about volunteers that have grown old and volunteers who come forward for the first time in later years. Finally, Robert Putnam's (2000) argument that social capital and civic participation have declined in the later part of the twentieth century has sparked considerable academic and political interest in civic engagement.

Civic engagement is a broad concept with many definitions, but the term usually associated with membership in voluntary associations, volunteering, and political participation. Volunteering through formal organizations has dominated discussions of civic engagement and drawn the most attention from researchers (Martinson and Minkler 2006). In this paper, we focus on formal volunteering, defined as an activity undertaken by an individual that is uncoerced, unpaid (or paid minimal compensation to offset costs), structured by an organization, and directed toward a community concern (Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth 1996). We discuss definitional struggles later, but our working definition excludes informal helping and caregiving, two productive activities of great importance to families and communities. This exclusion is in line with the view that volunteering is an altruistic behavior that is aimed at others to whom the volunteer owes no contractual, familial, or friendship obligation (Musick and Wilson 2008). It is, in part, that characteristic that has attracted scholarly attention to volunteering among older adults as a way simultaneously to address societal needs and promote the health of the aging population.

Research on volunteering among older adults has evolved with the emergence of new paradigms about old age and aging, the development of gerontological theories, the production of more and better social science on volunteering, and the creation of new public policies. This

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R.A. Settersten, Jr. and J.L. Angel (eds.), *Handbook of Sociology of Aging*, Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research, DOI 10.1007/978-1-4419-7374-0_21,

chapter begins with a brief overview of concepts and theories about volunteering that have emerged over the last several decades. We then summarize the current knowledge base on older volunteers. We end with a review of challenges and opportunities for older adult civic engagement research and policy.

Central Concepts and Developments in Volunteering

Gerontologists long have argued that active engagement in society is related to well-being in later life, and accordingly have promoted various forms of activity and engagement – social, productive, religious, educational, and intergenerational. Today, as the demographic, economic, and social realities of our world shift, another type of active engagement is gaining attention: civic engagement. The confluence of increasingly complex social problems and the burgeoning numbers of people who can expect to live 20 or 30 years past retirement calls us to consider the possibilities of a civically engaged older population. Having older adults vitally involved in volunteer activities aimed at the social good is a win–win scenario that has captured the imagination of many gerontologists, policymakers, and government and nonprofit leaders.

That said, our national efforts to invigorate volunteering have focused largely on youth. Volunteer opportunities for young people have seen impressive growth and improved incentive structures to attract participants. They include volunteer work as a graduation requirement, service learning curricula in schools and universities, and selective young–adult services corps like Teach for America and City Year. Older adults participate in our national service programs, but they are underrepresented in the largest and most widely known programs. For example, volunteers over age 50 account for only 6% of the Peace Corps volunteers (Peace Corps 2009), and fewer than 9% of AmeriCorps volunteers are over the age of 50 (O'Neill 2006–2007). The notable exception is the federal government's network of Senior Corps programs: RSVP, Foster Grandparents, and Senior Companions. Strict income and age eligibility requirements for the latter two programs, however, limit the involvement of large numbers of older adults.

Recently, the focus of civic engagement initiatives has shifted to include older adults. Service programs have emerged that specifically recruit older adults and that hold older age criteria for inclusion (see Morrow-Howell, Carden, and Sherraden 2005). To counter the prevailing view of aging as loss and decline and to combat the focus of public discussions on the significant costs of population aging, gerontologists have begun to use new terms like the new gerontology (Rowe 1997), active aging (World Health Organization 2002), and positive aging (Katz 2001–2002). Scholars now emphasize the health and vitality of the older population, the growing human capital and experience reserves within the older population, and the potential for ongoing and new involvements in later life. As Hudson (2008) summarizes, today's seniors are classified by production and contribution, not just consumption and need. In this changing context, older adults have been called the "new trustees of civic life" (Freedman 1999:19).

Volunteering fits squarely with emerging paradigms of successful and productive aging. Rowe and Kahn (1998) proposed three characteristics of successful aging: physical and functional health; high cognitive function; and active involvement in society. Societal involvement includes both close personal relationships with family and friends and continued involvement in productive activities. In the productive aging perspective (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, and Sherraden 2001), volunteering takes center stage – along with working and caregiving – as an activity that should be promoted because it produces economic and social benefits to communities. In fact, the term "unpaid work" gained popularity as a way to recognize the value of volunteering. In these paradigms, volunteering gained new respect, and now is viewed not just as a leisure activity but as a vital function in society and as an indicator of successful aging and a key to wellness in later life.

Volunteering as a health-producing activity is particularly compelling, given the rising costs of health care and the aging of the population. It is a win–win: volunteering not only improves civil society, it also improves the lives of older adults. Advocates call for expanding volunteer involvement of older adults – for the sake of communities as well as older adults themselves – and researchers have supplied the evidence that volunteering has positive effects on older adults, perhaps more so than on younger people (Van Willigen 2000). Of all the aspects of volunteering that social scientists study, the effects of volunteering on older adults' physical health, mental health, and life satisfaction have received the most attention (see Grimm, Spring, and Dietz 2007 for a review). This literature, which we review later, has accumulated to the point that volunteering is viewed as a public health strategy for an aging society (Fried et al. 2004; Tang 2009).

Theoretical Roots Within the Study of Volunteering

One of the original formal theories in social gerontology focused on engagement in later life and proposed that disengagement of older adults from social roles benefited both older adults and society as a whole because it facilitated an orderly transfer of power from one generation to the next (Cumming and Henry 1961). Yet disengagement theory stood in contrast to activity theory with its central proposition that active engagement was a key to a satisfying later life (Havighurst 1963). The positive outcomes associated with volunteering in later life have been explained by activity theory; and this theory is the conceptual base of programs aimed at recruiting and sustaining older adults in volunteer roles. Challenging both disengagement and activity theories, scholars put forth empirical evidence suggesting that late life satisfaction was related to continuing patterns of engagement and that the maintenance of previous activity patterns over time was related to positive outcomes for the individual (Neugarten, Havighurst, and Tobin 1968). Continuity theory (Atchley 1971) continues to explain patterns of volunteering; recent data clearly show that volunteering is a stable activity from midlife on, with past volunteering being the most powerful predictor of current volunteering (Chambré and Einolf 2008). A life course perspective also has been instructive in understanding how motivations, opportunities, and social roles affect the dynamics of volunteering over a lifetime. In the following sections, we review trends, social contexts, and outcomes of volunteering, presenting empirical and conceptual work that has advanced since these theoretical beginnings.

Volunteering in Later Life

Trends and Life Course Patterns

The number of people volunteering in the United States has fluctuated over the past 30 years, causing some observers to express concern about the decline of civic life in America. The volunteer rate for adults 65 years and older, however, has shown a continuous, upward trajectory throughout the last three decades. About 23.9% of adults aged 65 and older who participated in the current population survey (CPS) reported volunteering for an organization in 2009, which was 67% higher than in 1974 (Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) 2010; Grimm, Dietz, and Foster-Bey 2006). No other age group experienced such a large rise in its volunteer rate over the same time period.

Research consistently shows a distinct life course pattern of volunteering. Among the U.S. population, the rate of volunteering is shaped like an inverted U, peaking in midlife. On the other hand, the number of hours per volunteer rises linearly with age (Musick and Wilson 2008). September 2009

CPS data show that 26.8% of the U.S. adult population (age 16 and over) volunteered with an organization at least once over the previous year. When delineated by age group, adults aged 35–44 years are most likely to volunteer (31.5%), while adults aged 20–24 years are least likely (18.8%). Older adults (age 65 and over) fall in between, with 23.9% having volunteered over the past year (BLS 2010). The data, however, shows a different trend when one considers the annual number of hours each volunteer devotes to service activities. Older volunteers invest the most hours of any age group, boasting an average of 90 h per year; all other age groups fail to match this, with averages between 36 (ages 25 to 34) and 60 (ages 55 to 64) hours per year. In addition, those aged 65 and over are more likely than any other age group to volunteer more than 500 h per year (BLS).

When asked which type of organization volunteers considered their primary organization, 44.8% of CPS respondents aged 65 and over selected religious organizations. This was followed by social or community service organizations (18% of respondents) and hospital or other health-related organizations (10.1% of respondents). Volunteers aged 65 and older identified public safety organizations or environmental organizations as their primary organizations least frequently (1 and 1.9%, respectively) (BLS).

Although almost one quarter of older adults devote some time to formal volunteer activities, their engagement varies widely by individual characteristics (BLS 2010; Zedlewski and Schaner 2005). Older adults who are in the workforce – especially those in part-time positions – are more likely than their nonworking counterparts to volunteer; older adults with comparatively high levels of education and managerial experience are more likely to begin volunteering than older adults with low levels of education and without managerial experience; older adults who are in excellent or good health are more likely to begin volunteering than their peers with fair or poor health; married older adults are more likely to volunteer than are their peers who are unmarried; and retirees who consider religion important and who are active in their religious communities are more likely to volunteer than their nonreligious counterparts (BLS; Musick and Wilson 2008; Wilson 2000; Zedlewski 2007; Zedlewski and Schaner 2006). The tendency for these individual characteristics to be associated with greater likelihood of volunteering can be explained both by applying a life course continuity theory that asserts that in old age, individuals maintain previously held levels of activity (Atchley 1999; Chambré and Einolf 2008), and by exploring the social context in which an individual resides (Musick and Wilson 2008; Tang 2006).

To test continuity theory, Zedlewski (2007) employed both cross-sectional and longitudinal methods to explore characteristics of older adult volunteers. Her data, taken from the 1996 through 2004 waves of the health and retirement study (HRS), suggest that 81% of the older adults who volunteered before retirement (one-third of adult workers aged 55–64 years) continued to volunteer after retirement, while only 27% of the older adults who did not volunteer before retirement took on volunteer positions after retirement. Similarly, Chambré and Einolf (2008) analysis of data from the 1995 and 2005 waves of the midlife in the United States (MIDUS) survey reveals that the strongest single predictor of whether or not a participant volunteered in 2005 was the participant's volunteer status in 1995; those who volunteered in 2005 likely also volunteered in 1995.

Butrica, Johnson, and Zedlewski's (2009) analysis of HRS data collected over the four consecutive 2-year periods between 1996 and 2004 also reveals stability of volunteer participation over time. Their results show that almost 40% of participants who volunteered in 1996 also volunteered in all three subsequent periods. In contrast, almost every participant who did not volunteer in 1996 also did not volunteer in any subsequent period. Butrica et al.'s data also reveal that the rate at which older volunteers dropout starts relatively high, but declines over time – meaning that the longer an older person volunteers, the less likely he or she is to quit volunteering. Similarly, the likelihood that an older nonvolunteer will begin volunteering starts out low and declines over time, meaning that a nonvolunteer is unlikely to begin volunteering, and the longer an older nonvolunteer refrains from volunteering, the less likely he or she is to start volunteering. In looking closely at the charac-

teristics of the participants who volunteered throughout all four periods, Butrica et al. characterize the most consistent volunteers as those with the highest education, greatest religiosity, and marriage to a spouse who also volunteers.

Social Context

When considering social context, researchers theorize that the traits associated with higher rates of volunteering – continued workforce involvement, high socioeconomic status and educational attainment, good health, marriage, and high religiosity – leading to both greater awareness of and access to volunteer opportunities (Zedlewski 2007) and an increased likelihood of being asked to volunteer (Mutchler, Burr, and Caro 2003; Musick and Wilson 2008; Rotolo and Wilson 2004; Tang 2006). Older adults who remain in the workforce, are married, or are active in their religious communities, have larger social networks and experience greater social connectedness than older adults who are retired, unmarried, or nonreligious. This connectedness increases the likelihood that an older adult both will become aware of volunteer opportunities and will be asked to volunteer (BLS 2010; Gonyea and Googins 2006–2007; Musick and Wilson; Wilson 2000; Zedlewski 2007; Zedlewski and Schaner 2006). Further, older adults who work in managerial or salaried positions tend to have more flexible work schedules and have likely acquired more civic organizational and leadership skills than their lower-status counterparts, making them more desirable recruits, and therefore more likely to be asked to volunteer (Chambré and Einolf 2008; Mutchler et al. 2003; Rotolo and Wilson; Wilson 2004).

Being asked personally to volunteer is more effective than an impersonal appeal (Wilson 2000). According to September 2009 CPS data, 43.5% of volunteers over age 65 became involved with their main organization after being asked to volunteer, often by someone already involved in the organization (BLS 2010). Further, the Committee on an Aging Society reports that when not asked, only one of five people volunteer, but when asked, four of five people volunteer (Independent Sector 2000).

Older adults' volunteering practices and motivations are rooted in their social networks and goals. Tang (2006) found that the importance of one's social network in inducing volunteering is positively related to age. Studies have shown that older volunteers are much more likely than non-volunteers to have friends who volunteer (Wymer 1999). In comparison to younger adults, older adults rely more heavily on their social networks to become involved in volunteering. Plus, compared to younger adults, older adults are more motivated to volunteer by religious beliefs, a desire to interact with friends, and a need to be valued by others, whereas younger adults are more likely to adopt volunteer roles to explore their strengths and interests and to gain advancement in their careers (Chambré and Einolf 2008; Morrow-Howell 2006–2007; Musick and Wilson 2008; Okun and Schultz 2003). These age differences in types of volunteer organizations and activities may be due to different avenues of recruitment as well as different motivations for volunteering.

Older adults adjust their volunteer obligations based on each obligation's relevance for and effect on their well-being. Erikson's "generativity versus stagnation" stage of human development is rooted in an older adult's desire to leave behind a legacy and to pass wisdom and knowledge to younger generations (Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick 1986). Chambré and Einolf's (2008) analysis of the MIDUS survey showed that older adults' sense of generativity – measured by six statements that discerned a participant's level of concern for the next generation – was highly correlated with the likelihood of volunteering. Cheng (2009: 46) hypothesizes that "because generativity is often manifested in a social context (e.g., assistance to others in need), the judgment of impact [of a volunteer activity], therefore, largely depends on others' feedback." Cheng's results show that when older adults volunteer to benefit younger generations, older adults' belief that they have achieved

their generative goals depends on their perception of respect from younger people. If older people do not feel valued or fail to receive adequate recognition for their volunteer efforts, they likely will discontinue their service (Wilson 2000).

Carstensen's socioemotional selectivity theory explains that later in life, when adults recognize that their time and energy are limited, they pursue only the most meaningful social interactions and avoid those that are least meaningful (Carstensen 1992). When applied to volunteerism, socioemotional selectivity predicts that older people will have fewer overall volunteer commitments than younger adults, but their commitments will be more concentrated. CPS data fit this theory, showing that with age, a volunteer's total number of service hours increases, but these hours are concentrated among fewer organizations than for younger volunteers (BLS 2010; Hendricks and Cutler 2004).

Societal and Personal benefits of Volunteering

Societal Benefits

Older adults' volunteering is tremendously valuable to communities, measured both in economic terms and by the benefits reaped by the recipients of older adults' services (Zedlewski and Butrica 2007). Using data from the 2002 HRS and moderate-cost assumptions for estimating the value of work, Johnson and Schaner (2005) approximate the value of older adults' formal volunteer activities (defined as volunteering through or for an organization) at $44.3 billion per year.

Further, in modeling the Experience Corps Baltimore program's short- and long-term economic contributions to society, Frick and colleagues (2004) calculated that over a 2-year time period, each volunteer showed an average medical expenditure savings of $273 (when compared to a control group), which offset a portion of the program costs. Their models also showed that, in the long-term, if the program could cause even a mere 0.4% of students who would not have graduated otherwise to graduate eventually, the long-term benefits to the economy would far offset the program costs. These few additional graduates could expect increased lifetime earnings, and could expect to reap the health and sociocultural benefits associated with higher education.

Although these economic estimates are striking, they do not capture fully the personal benefits reaped by the recipients of older adults' services. Wheeler, Gorey, and Greenblatt (1998) conducted a meta-analysis of 37 studies published in the prior 25 years, nine of which measured the benefits to recipients of older adult volunteerism. Out of these nine studies, care recipients in four were nursing home residents, recipients in two were community-dwelling older adults, recipients in two were disabled children, and recipients in one were elderly caregivers. Studies measured various outcomes, but all included one of the following: life satisfaction and happiness, depression and isolation, client-assessed helpfulness, and goal attainment. When controlling for sample size, selection of participants, country, major design typology, and type or validity of dependent measures, Wheeler et al. found that 85% of people served by older adult volunteers showed improvement in the target area.

Additional research has found that older adult volunteers in preschool classrooms greatly help struggling kids adjust to school, and promote manners, appropriate behavior, and language development under stricter guidelines than are set by the professional educators (Larkin and Newman 2001). Older adult volunteers in primary and secondary schools significantly help improve attendance, academic achievement, and well-being, and significantly help decrease behavioral problems and substance use and abuse (Blieszner and Artale 2001; Rebok et al. 2004; Rogers and Taylor 1997). Older volunteers help increase graduation and retention rates of high school children and college freshmen, respectively (Coleman and DeRosa 2006; Muir 2006); and older volunteers' services help frail older adults remain independent and delay institutionalization (Barker 2002).

Personal Benefits

In addition to its value to the community, volunteering significantly benefits older adults. In fact, Van Willigen (2000) found that older volunteers reaped greater benefits than their younger counterparts. Volunteering in later life has been associated with improved physical health and decreased functional dependency (Fried et al. 2004; Luoh and Herzog 2002; Morrow-Howell et al. 2003; Tan et al. 2009; Tang 2009; Thoits and Hewitt 2001; Van Willigen), decreased morbidity (Fengler 1984; Luoh and Herzog 2002; Musick, Herzog, and House 1999), increased psychological well-being and fewer depressive symptoms (Greenfield and Marks 2004; Hao 2008; Jirovec and Hyduk 1998; Morrow-Howell et al. 2003; Morrow-Howell, Hong, and Tang 2009; Newman, Vasudev, and Onawola 1985; Sugihara et al. 2008; Thoits and Hewitt 2001; Windsor, Anstey, and Rodgers 2008), increased life satisfaction and quality of life (Van Willigen; Wheeler et al. 1998), improved cognitive ability and slower age-related cognitive decline (Carlson et al. 2008; Fried et al. 2004; Hao 2008; Park et al. 2007; Stine-Morrow et al. 2007), increased self efficacy (Li 2007), increased resilience and protection against role loss and negative life events (Greenfield and Marks 2004; Li 2007; Sugihara et al. 2008), and decreased mortality (Glass et al. 1999; Musick et al. 1999.). What is more, if an older adult is not civically and socially engaged, they risk experiencing decreased purpose in life (Greenfield and Marks 2004), health decline due to stagnant physical activity levels (Tan et al. 2009), and increased mortality, especially in the case of an emergency (Cannuscio, Block, and Kawachi 2003). In an extreme example, Semenza and colleagues (1996) studied deaths related to the July 1995 Chicago heat wave – three-fourths of which occurred among adults aged 65 and older – and found that socially isolated older adults (i.e., those who didn't participate in community groups) faced the highest risk of death; social isolation prevented many older residents from seeking shelter in community cooling centers and from being drawn out of their homes by concerned neighbors, friends, and colleagues.

Although countless studies identify the benefits of volunteering for older adults, research that explores the optimal amount of volunteering is inconsistent. Many researchers' data support a linear pattern, in which increased volunteering is associated with increasing benefits (Hinterlong, Morrow-Howell, and Rozario 2007), whereas others' data show that the positive effects of engagement persist to an upper limit, and any engagement beyond the limit has no further effect (Butrica and Schaner 2005). In contrast, Musick and colleagues' (1999) and Windsor and colleagues' (2008) data reveals a curvilinear pattern, in which increased volunteering is associated with increased benefits until a moderate number of hours (Musick et al. assign this upper limit at 40 annual hours and Windsor et al. at 800 annual hours), at which point increased volunteering hours are associated with decreasing benefits.

Explanations

Several mechanisms have been suggested as being responsible for the benefits of volunteering. For example, volunteering has been associated with greater social support and a stronger sense of responsibility and purpose that accompanies social and productive engagement. According to role theory, ebbing social roles (i.e., student, parent, spouse, employee) associated with later life can lead to decreased well-being. Therefore, adopting a formal volunteer role may serve to moderate the negative effect of role loss, especially for older adults who have experienced the most significant role losses (Adelmann 1994; Greenfield and Marks 2004; Sugihara et al. 2008; Van Willigen 2000). In fact, Musick and colleagues' (1999) data show the strongest protective effect of volunteering for participants who previously engaged in the least informal social interaction; specifically, lower-income, lower-educated, single, and minority older adults reaped more benefits than their higher-income,

higher-educated, married, and nonminority counterparts (Carlson et al. 2008; Fengler 1984; Morrow-Howell et al. 2009). This supports widely-accepted notions that social interaction and the accompanying affection, behavioral confirmation, and support attained through engagement actually is responsible for volunteerism's beneficial effects (Fried et al. 2004; Glass et al. 2006; Grundy et al. 2007; Li 2007; Luoh & Herzog 2002; Park et al. 2007; Rowe and Kahn 1997; Steverink and Lindenberg 2006; Stine-Morrow et al. 2007; Sun and Liu 2006; Tang 2009; Thoits and Hewett 2001).

An alternative explanation for the benefits of engagement is the sense of responsibility, purpose, productivity, and usefulness one feels when engaged in volunteering (Greenfield and Marks 2004; Langer and Rodin 1976; Luoh and Herzog 2002; Mannell 1993; Rowe and Kahn 1997). To demonstrate the power of a sense of responsibility and purpose, Wilson et al. (2007) analyzed and reported 12 years of data from The Religious Orders Study; participants included 997 older Catholic nuns, priests, and brothers recruited from more than 40 groups across the country. Upon enrollment, each participant underwent a uniform clinical evaluation that included a medical history, a complete neurological examination, and a set of 20 cognitive evaluations. This set of evaluations was repeated annually for up to 12 years. In the case of death, a participant's brain underwent a full neuropathologic evaluation.

Results show that high conscientiousness, defined as "an individual's tendency to control impulses and be goal directed . . . be self-disciplined, scrupulous, and purposeful" (Wilson et al. 2007:1204–1205), is associated with reduced risk for Alzheimer's disease, even when controlling for all covariates individually and collectively: age, sex, education, the effect of other personality traits (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, and agreeableness), physical activity, frequency of cognitive activity, size of social network, depressive symptoms, and mild cognitive impairment. Further, when examining participants' brains during autopsies, many highly conscientious participants had lesions and tangles that would meet criteria for Alzheimer's, but those patients did not exhibit any symptoms of dementia before death. Although Wilson et al.'s sample was relatively homogenous and does not represent the general population, their data strongly suggest that reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease is associated with the sense of purpose and discipline that accompanies holding volunteer roles in later life.

Challenges and Directions for Future Research

Institutional Lag

Aging advocates long have pointed to the asynchrony between the human capital resources of the aging population and the capacity of organizational structures to engage older adults in socially valued and productive roles (Riley and Riley 1994). A current concern is that organizations are not ready to take advantage of the growing numbers of older volunteers (Casner-Lotto 2007; Freedman 1999). In a large survey of nonprofits conducted by the Urban Institute (Hager and Brudney 2004), researchers noted that organizational adoption of recommended volunteer management practices was not widespread. About 30% of older adults drop out of volunteering after 1 year of service (Foster-Bey, Grimm, and Dietz 2007), a loss of volunteer labor that is estimated at about $38 billion a year (Eisner et al. 2009). Plus, turnover tends to be associated with the nature of the volunteer work. For example, volunteer tenure was the shortest for those providing general labor or supplying transportation and longest for those providing professional or management services (Foster-Bey et al.).

To advance understanding of these issues, new models of volunteer engagement have focused on organizational structures rather than individual volunteers' characteristics. Invoking Riley and Riley's (1994) concept of structural lag, researchers have begun systematically to define and measure aspects of institutional capacity that affect the recruitment, retention, and effective use of

older volunteers (Sherraden et al. 2001; Hong et al. 2009). For example, in a study of 374 volunteers across 51 service programs, Tang, Morrow-Howell, and Hong (2008) document the importance of flexibility in terms of time commitment, schedule, and type of volunteer activity to older volunteers in general, and to low-income and non-White volunteers in particular. In another study using the institutional perspective, McBride et al. (2009) demonstrate the role of stipends in increasing diversity among older volunteers and ensuring retention. Other work suggests that volunteer turnover can be reduced by ensuring that volunteers gain a sense of accomplishment and are recognized for their contributions by effectively monitoring and supervising their activities and by providing various cash or in-kind compensation to meet expenses (Cnaan and Cascio 1998; Finkelstein, Penner, and Brannick 2005; Wilson and Musick 1999; Netting et al. 2004). In addition, characteristics of volunteer programs like adequate training, supervision, recognition, flexibility, and stipends, are associated with more positive outcomes in terms of meeting volunteer expectations, intensity and duration of volunteer service, and perceived benefits of participation (McBride et al. 2009).

As Musick and Wilson (2008) point out, individual characteristics, such as capacities, values, and attitudes, are necessary but not sufficient to move people into volunteering. Given the low likelihood of modifying *individual* capacity, especially in older populations, improving *institutional* capacity may be the most promising direction for future research aimed at maximizing volunteer engagement and outcomes.

Critical Perspectives

Evidence to date indicates that civic engagement benefits both participants and the broader community. That fact notwithstanding, scholars must heed concerns from critical gerontology (Holstein 2006; Hudson 2008; Martinson and Minkler 2006). Martinson and Minkler have argued that the "politics of [welfare-state] retrenchment and devolution" over the past three decades have served as a "powerful motivator for the current promotion of volunteering in later life" (p. 321); there is concern that older adults are being called on as substitutes for critical public funding support to nonprofit and public organizations that meet community needs. Also, researchers express concern that civic engagement among older adults is dominated by high-resource individuals and fails to include the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the older population. Because the term civic engagement commonly favors formal volunteer activity, it devalues informal volunteering or helping outside of an official volunteer structure. Neighborhood- and family-based helping, however, is common among minority groups, including African-Americans and Hispanics, who often do not define helping as "volunteering," and therefore are unlikely to report it as such on a survey. Nor do most immigrant groups, which have rich traditions of helping others, self-describe their roles in terms of "volunteering" (Yoshida, Gordon, and Henkin 2008). Studies have noted that "volunteering" and "service" are cultural constructs of specific segments of American society that may be understood differently across different groups. For example, in low-income populations, the term "community service" may have negative connotations, conjuring images of court-ordered community service. Studies also have found that the term "volunteer" does not resonate well among African-American and Hispanics who traditionally have been viewed as recipients of services rather than as contributors engaged in community problem solving (Center for Health Communication, Harvard School of Public Health 2004). In presenting volunteering as a normative retirement role, older adults who do not engage risk judgment (Kaskie et al. 2008). Holstein (2006) and Ekerdt (1986) express concern that coercive social expectations, comparable to the notion of a work ethic or a "busy ethic" around older adult civic engagement, may denigrate those who are too ill, too poor, or otherwise unable to join the movement. The challenge for policymakers, program leaders, and researchers is to expand older adults' opportunities for civic contribution while addressing their economic, social, cultural, and physical diversity.

Bowling Alone or Blogging Together?

Putnam's claim that participation in virtually every traditional civic, social, and fraternal arena – including politics, churches, labor unions, parent–teacher associations, and even organized bowling leagues – has declined since the 1960s has generated vigorous discussion and debate among academics and policymakers alike. Critics claim that his argument relies too heavily on statistics showing declines in membership in fraternal organizations like the Boy Scouts, 4-H Clubs, Shriners, and Elks, but overlooks newer organizations that have risen to take their places, such as Habitat for Humanity and Meals on Wheels (Rich 1999; Schudson 2006). The United States, Putnam's detractors maintain, simply is experiencing a transformation in its forms of civic engagement rather than a decline. More traditional civic associations, such as the PTA., the League of Women Voters, or the American Legion, are giving way to new and alternative forms of political and civic engagement, particularly those facilitated by the Internet. Volunteering, in particular, is expanding through the Internet. Indeed, some researchers have faith that the Internet will launch and nurture forms of civic engagement that will be as important to communities as were the Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lions Clubs in past decades (Ester and Vinken 2003).

The Internet is creating new ways for people to connect and engage with one another. According to data from VolunteerMatch.com, an online database of volunteer jobs, interest in "virtual" or remote volunteering is rising dramatically. In 2005, volunteers matched themselves to nearly 40,000 virtual positions on VolunteerMatch.org, compared with 15,000 in 2000. The increase of websites like onlinevolunteering.org, an initiative by the United Nations Volunteers program, helps nonprofits around the world find online volunteers for jobs like editing or translating documents, writing newsletters, mentoring, and creating databases. Nonprofits and charities find that recruiting online volunteers not only helps them expand their searches beyond their immediate geographic areas but also helps them appeal to people with busy schedules and attract a more diverse and skilled volunteer corps than they otherwise might. Also, online volunteering offers those with physical limitations, home-based obligations, or transportation barriers opportunities to engage. People who volunteer through the Internet find that because they work around their own schedules – and avoid commuting – they are able to donate more time and energy to causes that really matter to them (Vail 2008).

Although Putnam worries about the Internet's tendency to separate people from each other rather than bring them together, others see the Internet as an opportunity to reestablish connections – through email lists, affinity groups, chat rooms, and blogs – that have been lost as fewer people join civic organizations (Uslaner 2004). Scholars like Ester and Vinken (2003:667) argue that the evidence about the Internet, taken together, makes "a strong case that the potential for advancing civil society is more likely to be rising than declining." Moreover, a study by Best and Krueger (2006) that uses nationally representative data and more refined measures of online social interactions than previously available finds that online interactions do foster connections critical to expanding social networks and producing residuals – jointly known as "social capital" – such as generalized trust, integrity, and reciprocity. Finally, although Gilleard, Hyde, and Higgs (2007) found a decreased attachment to the physical community with increased technology use, their data assert that communication technology use does not decrease the sense of trust and friendliness of a neighborhood.

Clearly, there is a need for research and theory on civic engagement to consider how the Internet is developing as an alternative to traditional civic engagement structures. As Ester and Vinken (2003) note, however, standard political and civic engagement participation scales found in mainstream survey research do not cover such new forms of political and civic involvement. The authors argue that scholars must develop ways to measure these contemporary forms of civic engagement before conclusions can be drawn regarding the decline of civic life in the twenty-first century.

A "Civic Core"?

Despite the popularity of Putnam's work, recent research finds little support for his claim that levels of civic engagement are declining in the general population (Foster-Bey et al. 2007) or that baby boomers will volunteer in smaller numbers than previous elderly cohorts (Einolf 2009; Rotolo and Wilson 2004). Putnam's observation that some individuals are considerably more engaged in civic activities than others, however, has stimulated new research that raises questions about the challenges of citizen engagement. Using data from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating conducted by Statistics Canada, Reed and Selbee (2001) identify the principal contributors in each of three modes of civic engagement: volunteering, charitable giving, and participation in community organizations. Their data reveal a small cadre – a civic core – of individuals who are involved heavily in giving, volunteering, and participating. Indeed, the authors find a remarkably high degree of concentration: one quarter of adults account for about three quarters of all time and money contributed to communal and charitable activities. Furthermore, the disparity in engagement levels likely is not unique to Canada. Several U.S. studies suggest that a small proportion of older adult volunteers account for the majority of volunteer time (Fischer, Mueller, and Cooper 1991; Kaskie et al. 2008). Burr, Mutchler, and Caro's (2007) finding that a small group of "super helpers" are engaged heavily in a cluster of productive activities in later life lends support to the thesis that most civic activity is done by a small proportion of the population. Although the finding may not seem surprising – and conforms to popular notions of "super volunteers" – its implications for strengthening civic engagement among older adults have not yet been addressed by researchers or policymakers. Clearly, further research is required to determine accurately the disparity in levels of civic activity among older Americans.

The Search for a Consensual Definition of Civic Engagement

Before researchers truly can measure civic engagement, they must agree on a common definition. To date, there is no prevailing definition, although many have been offered (National Academy on an Aging Society 2009a). The term currently encompasses a range of activities, "[f]rom volunteering to voting, from community organizing to political advocacy." Central to most characterizations is the notion that civic engagement is *action* that contributes "to the improvement of one's community, neighborhood, and nation" (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement 2009, ¶ 7). The types of activities identified as civic engagement fall into two broad categories: social (including most behaviors classified as volunteering and public service) and political (including participation in all levels of the political process; McBride 2006–2007). The multifaceted character of civic engagement likely is responsible for a lack of consensus regarding its definition. Not only does the concept of civic engagement cover a number of different activities, but it encompasses volunteering done on behalf of formal organizations, including schools, churches, hospitals, and nonprofit organizations, and on behalf of informal entities, such as friends, neighbors, and relatives (Putnam 2000).

Further complicating matters is that some observers include both paid and unpaid contributions under the same rubric. The advent of incentive programs, such as educational vouchers, stipends, and other forms of compensation has blurred the line between paid and unpaid participation. Moreover, some scholars argue that unpaid caregiving constitutes a vital form of civic engagement (Herd and Meyer 2002; Martinson and Minkler 2006). Others suggest that civic engagement includes the acquisition of knowledge and skills required to perform various civic actions (Fisher, McInerney, and Petersen 2005).

Recently, Toppe and Galaskiewicz (2006) proposed that civic engagement be conceptualized and measured along four dimensions: (1) helping, including volunteering and neighboring; (2) giving to people, organizations, and causes; (3) influencing, including political and cause-related activities; and (4) participating, as in group memberships or bowling leagues. Their detailed typology has been applied in recent work (e.g., Yoshida et al. 2008) and shows promise as a starting point for a systematic approach to the conceptualization and measurement of civic engagement. Given widespread efforts to promote civic engagement, a more precise definition will help policymakers and program administrators target the activities that receive public and private support. Further, as Kaskie et al. (2008: 370) note, "being able to define and differentiate individuals who occupy this role may help researchers conduct a more rigorous evaluation of the relationships among civic engagement, social capital, and individual health outcomes."

Policy Implications

The retirement of the baby boom cohort over the next 20 years offers an unprecedented opportunity to tap into a large base of potential volunteers. But policy interventions are needed to ensure that all older adults have opportunities to engage in volunteer activities that can benefit the community as well as the volunteers themselves (Kahana and Force 2008). Key findings we have highlighted can guide policy initiatives to maximize volunteer recruitment, retention, and benefits. Evidence suggests that the most effective way to recruit a volunteer is to ask them (Independent Sector 2000). In light of the fact that the American Time Use Survey finds that adults aged 65 and over spend much more time watching television (4 h) than do younger adults (2.5 h), it may prove effective to disseminate such information through public awareness campaigns that would educate older adults about volunteer opportunities and the positive health outcomes of engagement (Kaskie et al. 2008). Further, media campaigns targeting those of lower socioeconomic status might yield the largest payoffs because these individuals report the lowest levels of volunteer activity. Another recruitment strategy could come from the finding that past volunteering is the leading predictor of future volunteering. Zedlewski (2007), for example, showed that the share of working persons who start volunteering after retirement is much smaller than those who continue to volunteer after retirement. With little evidence that retirement inspires volunteering, recruiting initiatives may experience greater payoffs by targeting young and middle-aged adults while they are still in the workforce. The strong link between work and volunteering spotlights the critical role of the business sector in promoting volunteering among the aging population. Work-based volunteer programs in particular have the potential to promote a commitment to volunteering among workers that will extend into retirement (Gonyea and Googins 2006–2007). Recognizing the importance of volunteering continuity, policymakers might offer subsidies, tax credits, and other incentives to encourage employers to expand community service opportunities for their employees as they approach retirement (O'Neill 2006–2007).

From an institutional perspective, research reviewed here has demonstrated that voluntary organizations can facilitate the inclusion of older adults from diverse backgrounds by offering stipends, increasing role flexibility in the volunteer position, and providing public recognition for the volunteers' contributions. Furthermore, expanding home-based volunteer opportunities (via telephone or computer) could increase access for older adults with disabilities, transportation difficulties, or mobility challenges. Policymakers also can use rewards and incentives to encourage activities that benefit the public. Studies suggest that small incentives – such as education credits, access to group health insurance, or a modest monthly stipend – might reap large benefits by attracting more adults into community service (Bridgeland, Putnam, and Wofford 2008). Indeed, the utilization of stipended volunteers long has been seen as a route to maximizing the participation of low-income older adults. For example, older adults at or below 125% of the poverty line can serve in the

voluntary programs of the national Senior Corps for 15–20 h per week in exchange for a modest stipend of $2.65 an hour. Also, under Experience Corps, a school-based program, older adults work one-on-one with young children, create and run before- and after-school programs, and receive modest stipends for their services. Not only does this program reach out to an underutilized group of volunteers (generally older, low-income African-Americans), but it also helps to address their economic needs. Morrow-Howell and colleagues (2003, 2009) go so far as to recommend that because of the benefits reaped, it might make sense to select low-income and minority volunteers because of the greater likelihood of maximizing returns to the individuals.

Although advocates for these programs agree that they do a great deal to facilitate the involvement of low-income older adults, the age, income, and commitment requirements often are viewed as exclusive of a broad population of older adults – especially among baby boomers (Freedman 1999). In April 2009, however, President Obama signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act; it calls for the increased engagement of older adults in volunteer roles, allotting 10% of AmeriCorps' total FY 2010 budget of $372.5 million for organizations enrolling adults aged 55 and older, and funding $1,000 higher education awards – transferable to children and grandchildren – to older volunteers who contribute 350 h of service annually (Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act 2009, § 2142). The new law also expands service options for older Americans by lowering the age requirement for the Foster Grandparent and Senior Companion programs from 60–55, and increasing hourly stipend eligibility for these programs from 125 to 200% of the federal poverty level.

The passage of this landmark legislation – the largest expansion of national service since the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression – highlights the need to increase the amount of science-based research aimed at improving recruitment and retention of older volunteers.

Conclusion

Civic engagement among older adults is gaining attention in both popular and academic press. As the health and education of aging Americans continue to increase, so does the opportunity to engage this population in civic activities aimed at improving communities. Furthermore, older adults' volunteer activities help governments and nonprofit organizations meet the growing demand for social services. As we have highlighted, increased volunteerism has a palpable effect on the economy, and potentially reduces government costs, as the resulting healthier older adults require less health care (Zedlewski and Butrica 2007).

This win–win scenario has captured the attention of social scientists, policymakers, and nonprofit leaders who promote civic engagement and has spawned a host of related activities. The three major professional associations focused on aging in this country – the American Society on Aging, The Gerontological Society of America, and the National Council on Aging – have made civic engagement a programmatic priority. Research on volunteering has benefitted from keen interest by private foundations. The Atlantic Philanthropies and the MetLife Foundation, in particular, have invested significant resources in program and policy developments. These developments have created opportunities for applied research and community-academic partnerships. Research has played an important role in building a civic engagement movement and expanding the Civic Enterprise (National Academy on an Aging Society 2009b), the network of interrelated initiatives focused on civic engagement among older adults. For example, the accumulation of more and better evidence on the health benefits of volunteering is responsible for the push to expand volunteer opportunities as a public health strategy. In other ways, however, action is outstripping knowledge development, especially in regards to effective strategies to recruit and retain older volunteers. Applied social science knowledge about engaging older volunteers to guide program and policy initiatives has never been more important.

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