OLDER ADULTS ENGAGED AS VOLUNTEERS

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Abstract:
It is well-known that birth rates across Europe are falling, whilst life expectancy is growing. This obviously means that there will be fewer and fewer working people able to drive the economy and pick up the increasing welfare, health, and social bills. Nonetheless, these needs have to be met, so older adults should probably be encouraged to study and work beyond retirement, whether through part-time jobs or on a voluntary basis. How many of the seniors are already engaged in helping their community and in what ways? The present paper will try to look at volunteer work from this perspective, namely that of the elderly assuming an active role in society.

Key words: older adults, volunteer, community

Who becomes a volunteer and why?
A volunteer is someone who carries out an activity for the community or for the benefit of another person willingly, without expecting any type of reward. Thus, volunteerism is a form of active participation in the life of the community which contributes significantly to the improvement of the quality of life, to an increase in solidarity, to a balanced economic and social development (Toea, 2006, pg. 23). There are two major types of volunteering: formal (in an organization) and informal (individually or in a group, but not as part of an organization).

But what motivates people to become volunteers? Obviously motivation is unique for each person, but most of the time volunteers mention the following reasons which have determined them to do community work: altruism, gaining experience, personal satisfaction (to do something useful), sense of duty, personal development (career opportunities), making connections with various people, or improving the quality of their life by improving existing conditions in their community.

Volunteerism is not a job, so people who choose to do it take up some of their free time. Anyone can become a volunteer, regardless of education, social status, gender or age. Why then do
we so frequently come across the prejudice that volunteers have to be recruited from a certain segment of the population, namely students or younger people? Toea and her colleagues asserted: “… pupils and students are dominated at a motivational level by the desire to know and be acknowledged. That is why this type of volunteers is most often involved in volunteering projects. But it is just a prejudice which stops us from using all the resources available for the activity of volunteering” (2006, pg. 26).

Indeed, people with disabilities for instance are a resource which is ignored and, implicitly, stigmatized. It is automatically assumed (by certain organizations) that this category of people cannot contribute in any way to volunteering activities. That is a false presumption which unfortunately extends to another category, namely the seniors of our society.

**Older adults as beneficiaries of volunteer work**

We are obsessively being repeated the fact that we live in an “age” of acute demographic aging and that this trend is most probably going to continue. Birth rates across Europe are falling, whilst life expectancy is growing (to note here just two of the causes). Still, paradoxically, as PhD Professor Constantin Bogdan observed, “… modern society generates old age, but tends to reject and isolate it” (quoted in Toea, 2006, pg. 42). His statement is partially true. With all the technological advancements, seniors gradually lose their role in society. This becomes particularly obvious after retirement.

However, governments and organizations are busy making strategies and offering assistance to the elderly. This category is not forgotten altogether, but is treated mostly as beneficiary of different services offered by younger volunteers. These services mainly include assistance in getting medical care (identifying the elderly persons who need it, facilitating their access, and sometimes even accompanying them to get it) or organizing socio-cultural events (such as home visits, going on trips, walking with the older adults, attending various cultural performances together, talking on the phone or participating in support groups). It must be mentioned that sometimes the elderly are encouraged to participate actively in the cultural performances (by acting in plays for example or by exhibiting their own photographs). Moreover, volunteers make sure that older adults have access to any type of information, to psychological and juridical counseling etc. Other activities include
help with daily chores like shopping, cleaning the house, or paying the bills.

Very often volunteers organize events and media campaigns in order to inform the population about problems with which older persons are confronting. They also carry out fundraising campaigns in order to ensure the necessary financial contributions for developing and offering the services discussed above.

All in all it is a very positive thing that society is concerned about the well-being of its seniors. But to a certain extent, making them mere beneficiaries of services provided by others is demotivating. In addition, it certainly doesn’t boost their self-esteem or make them feel useful. Involving older adults actively, in volunteering at least, would have better results.

Older adults as participants in volunteer work

As we have hinted before, the “graying” of the population will continue and it is estimated that by the year 2050 “the EU will move from having four persons of working age for every elderly citizen to only two” (Carone & Costello, 2006). Furthermore, according to official projections, by the same year “the number of young persons in the EU (aged 0-14) will drop by 18%, the working-age population (15-64) will fall by 48 million, or 16%, whereas the elderly population aged 65+ will rise sharply, by 58 million (or 77%), and the fastest-growing segment of the population will be the very old (aged 80+)” (Carone & Costello, 2006). By analyzing these figures it becomes evident that the working-age segment will no longer be able to support the increasing costs of welfare, health, and social bills. Therefore, it may prove a stark necessity to engage the seniors of the future in paid work (by taking up part-time jobs after retirement, for example), formal volunteering or caregiving.

Researchers from the United States and Western Europe especially have been particularly concerned with these issues since the so-called “baby boomers” will reach retirement age soon. They are the generation born shortly after World War II (so, roughly between 1946 and 1964 when most countries witnessed an explainable baby boom), and who are expected to retire within the next twenty years. It has been argued that, if we encouraged boomers’ volunteerism, “Benefits would accrue to society directly through the contributions of unpaid work, to older adults as volunteering improves health and well-being, and potentially to
government, as healthier older adults require fewer health care dollars.” (Zedlewski & Schaner, 2006, pg. 1)

In what follows we shall focus on the benefits brought by volunteer work to older persons themselves. As we have already seen, in order to become a volunteer one must be willing to devote a certain amount of time to this activity. After retirement, elderly citizens have a lot of time on their hands which they could use by engaging in voluntary actions that would make them feel motivated and useful. Seeing the projects they organized, designed or participated in put into practice surely generates satisfaction. Moreover, by working alongside younger volunteers, intergenerational ties would be strengthened and marginalization could be avoided. In addition, involving older adults in voluntary activities would be extremely advantageous because they have acquired valuable life experience, insufficiently used by modern societies.

Several studies document a direct connection between volunteering and better health, as far as older persons are concerned (“Promoting volunteerism in favour of older persons - The Spanish Example”, by Manuel Nevado Rey, quoted in Toea, 2006, pg. 29-34, “Older Adults Engaged as Volunteers”, by Sheila R. Zedlewski and Simone G. Schaner, 2006, “Differences in Family Functioning and Health Between Older Adult Volunteers and Non-Volunteers”, by Ronald L. Jirovec, PhD, 2005).

Thus, Manuel Nevado Rey writes that: “… social relations, or the lack of social relations, constitutes an important health risk factor, just like smoking, hypertension, fats in blood, obesity etc” (2006, pg. 30). He argues that involving older adults in volunteering activities does not only benefit their state of mind, but also improves their physical condition.

Ronald L. Jirovec has carried out an investigation, in a large metropolitan area from the USA, aiming to identify “differences in family functioning and health between older adults volunteers and non-volunteers”. He based his research on the assumption that physical health was a precondition for volunteering and eventually determined, after interviewing 179 participants, that it was actually more than just a precondition, but also an outcome. Hence, he concluded that: “… volunteerism was associated with health promotion in the form of more frequent contact with medical practitioners such as doctors or nurses” (2005, pg. 29).
Zedlewski and Schaner reached roughly the same conclusions. They quoted a study carried out by Glass et al in 1999 which showed that “productive activities like volunteering and work can lower the risk of mortality as much as fitness activities can” (2006, pg 1). Interestingly, they also determined that “adults age 55 to 64 are no more likely to volunteer for organizations than their counterparts age 75 and older, and those age 65 to 74 are only slightly more likely than those age 75 and older to volunteer formally” (2006, pg. 4). So yet another bias is shattered! Apparently the older one gets, the more willing to be engaged in active life one is!

Besides bringing benefits to an elderly person’s mental and physical health, volunteering can also improve family functioning. Hence, Jirovec writes that “… volunteers rated their family functioning significantly higher than non-volunteers” (2005, pg. 29). Moreover, “… older adults who volunteered for two or more agencies reported significantly higher family functioning” (2005, pg. 29). Thus, we may conclude without being hasty that the more active elderly lead happier and more satisfied lives (including family lives).

**Factors that spur older individuals to volunteer**

So far we have seen that relatively good health can be a factor which influences people to volunteer or not. We have also concluded that older age does not necessarily matter and it does not hinder people’s motivation to become involved as volunteers. But do other factors, such as gender, religion, income or education, play a part in people’s decisions to volunteer?

Researchers have determined that gender does not seem to make a difference (Jirovec, 2005, pg. 26; Zedlewski & Schaner, 2006, pg. 5). However, perhaps surprisingly, Zedlewski & Schaner have found out that “… men are more likely to volunteer informally than women. This result defies the conventional wisdom that women spend more time volunteering than men (…)” (2006, pg. 5).

On the other hand, apparently religion has a strong correlation with volunteering. Studies have shown that “The probability of volunteering formally is 23% higher for individuals who describe religion as <<very important>>, compared with individuals for whom religion is <<not important>> (Zedlewski & Schaner, 2006, pg. 3). Jirovec quotes Fischer & Schaffer (1993) and writes that “church members had a greater likelihood of
organizational volunteering than nonmembers” (2005, pg. 26). Probably, very religious people also have more opportunities to volunteer through their places of worship (the Maltese Relief Service, to give just one random example).

As far as the variables of income and education are concerned, researchers have found that they do influence the elderly person’s decision to volunteer. Thus, Zedlewski & Schaner conclude that “A college degree adds 23% to the probability of volunteering formally and 12 to the probability of volunteering informally, compared to those without a high-school degree” (2006, pg. 3). Furthermore, their study has shown that “… the effect of education on the probability of volunteering diminishes as the level of education declines” (2006, pg. 3). The same holds true for people with higher incomes, who volunteer more often then those with low incomes. Likewise, “the probabilities of volunteering diminish as income declines” (Zedlewski & Schaner, 2006, pg. 4).

These results on who is likely to volunteer among the elderly could provide a starting point for their recruitment to formal volunteering. For instance, policy-makers and NGO representatives should perhaps target non-religious, low-income older adults, because they are the ones less involved in volunteerism at the moment. So, how can we motivate them to take up organizational volunteering and what challenges are we facing?

Challenges

It is clear that Americans and Western Europeans have paid quite some attention to attracting older adults into volunteering. And this proved to be in everyone’s advantage, as we have seen above. However, they too have met some difficulties since traditional societies associate old age with passivity and inactivity. But older adults resent these attitudes and they manifest availability to take part in volunteering activities, should their contribution be required. Thus, volunteerism should be presented as a possible substitute for professional life, as a way of keeping up with times and of staying in touch with different generations, and as an alternative form of being active and useful. Yet, recruiting them is not enough. Elderly volunteers have to be retained, and the best ways to achieve that are assigning appropriate activities “congruent with their health status, type of activity preferred, and the volume of hours they are willing to donate” (Jirovec, 2005, pg. 30). We must not ignore, Jirovec continues, the needs of low-income older adults who do not
volunteer because of “financial expense, inadequate transportation, or inexperience” (2005, pg. 30).

Romania’s Case

In Romania, older persons are still very much concerned with caregiving, but there is little evidence about organizational volunteering involving older adults. However, as we have seen, the two can be complementary social roles, rather than conflicting. Mentalities are difficult to change, yet a group of elderly citizens in Timisoara is trying to do just that. The Seniors’ Council was set up in January 2004, by the mayor of Timisoara, Mr. Gheorghe Ciuhandu, at the initiative of the vice-mayor Mr. Adrian Orza, who is in charge of the problems of the elderly and who had seen this type of consultative body work in Mulhouse, twin city in France.

“The members of the Seniors’ Council are elected from among the citizens of Timisoara, men and women aged over 53, who voluntarily put in for the election in writing, in such a way as to ensure good representation” (information taken from the official site of Timisoara City Hall, [http://www.primariatm.ro/](http://www.primariatm.ro/)). The Council mainly works in 4 commissions (the Commission for Elderly Citizens, the Commission for Collective Memory, Tradition and City Aesthetics, the Commission for Public Relations, and the Commission for Intergenerational Relations), which establish the activities they will carry out. The Seniors’ Council is a consultative body which can make proposals regarding any aspect related to the life of the city. The conclusions and proposals put forth by the Council are forwarded to the vice-mayor in charge of the problems of the elderly, who then forwards them to “the Mayor, vice mayors, the Local Council, municipal departments, public departments or other institutions”. Among the activities carried out by the Seniors’ Council in Timisoara we must mention: organizing photo exhibitions, going on trips, collaborating tightly with the Day Center for Elderly and with other organizations. It is of utmost importance to underline the fact that this is a type of formal volunteering, and that this consultative body made up exclusively of older citizens refrains from any ideologically, religiously or politically biased statements. Its members focus only on community issues to which they try to provide solutions.
Final thoughts

As a general conclusion, we can state that things are moving towards the integration of the elderly in volunteering activities. Romania is a bit behind the USA and Western European countries in this respect, but we are striving to catch up. Engagement of older adults in volunteerism brings benefits to the elderly themselves, but also to the community and society as a whole.

Bibliography

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