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Comparison of Older Volunteers and Older Nonvolunteers in the Philadelphia Area, 1993-1998

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Final Report

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This study was conducted from August 1993 until July 1998.

As stated in Section A of the original grant proposal, "the major aim of the proposed research is to examine predictors of volunteer behavior and the effects that volunteer behavior has on the mental health of older persons."

The original sample design was to interview 400 persons at three point in time. It was anticipated that the original sample would contain the following:

Projected Sample

	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
White	200	180	162
African American	200	180	162
Female	272	245	221
Male	128	115	103
Volunteers	146	130	117
Male volunteers	72	65	59
Female volunteers	168	151	136
White volunteers	100	90	81
African American volunteers	133	120	108
Total sample	**400**	**360**	**324**

The final sample appears in the following table. The original differences between the projected and the final sample are discussed in the attached paper, "Samples in Sociological Research, which is under review for the *Journal of Applied Sociology* (attached). The attrition rate was much

higher than anticipated, however still allows for a large enough sample size for analysis of the longitudinal model through structural equation modeling.

Final Sample

	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
White	229	196	140
African American	124	100	66
Female	175	145	98
Male	181	154	109
Volunteers	134	110	82
Male volunteers	63	52	38
Female volunteers	71	58	44
White volunteers	102	84	59
African American volunteers	32	26	23
Total sample	**356**	**299**	**207**

The major hypotheses as outlined in the original proposal were as follows:

1. Structural, cultural, personality and situational factors predict whether or not one volunteers which in turn impacts on the mental health of older persons.

The model predicting volunteer behavior has been found to be effective. The results were presented at the Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America in 1996. The poster presented a discriminant analysis predicting whether the hypothesized factors accurately predicted status as either a volunteer or nonvolunteer. Those analyses are currently being redone as a logistic regression and the work will be submitted for publication in the Spring of 1999.

The overall model, which includes both predictors and outcomes, was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America in 1998. The final model yielded a good fit with the data, through structural equation modeling. The cultural factor, measured by perceived importance of volunteering and past volunteering, significantly predicted volunteer behavior in a positive direction. Depression was significantly predicted in a negative direction by volunteer behavior.

2. Participation in volunteer activities will be related to (a) fewer psychiatric symptoms (b) lower levels of depression (c) higher levels of positive affect (d) lower levels of medication use and (e) higher levels of life satisfaction.

The outcome variables were modified somewhat in the project, with medication use being dropped.

The relationship of participation in volunteer activities to the mental health of older persons was presented at a paper session at the Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America in 1997. T-tests were performed to assess the difference between volunteers and nonvolunteers on the outcome measures of daily affect and depression. Significant differences were found for both, with volunteers having a higher mean level of positive affect and lower mean levels of depression.

Analysis of variance was performed to assess the difference in mental health outcomes across the four groups proposed by the typology of life course volunteering from the original proposal. The four types were: continuous volunteers, continuous nonvolunteers, new volunteers, and lost volunteers. Significant differences were found across the four groups, with new volunteers having the highest mean level of positive affect and the lowest mean level of depression.

The results from this paper will be combined with the longitudinal analysis (see hypothesis 5) which is in process for a journal article submission late 1999.

3. For the volunteers in the sample the effect on mental health of (a) amount of time spent volunteering (b) intensity of volunteerism and (c) type of role will be mediated through the satisfaction with the volunteer role.

Based on comments from the final review of the proposal, the mediation model was revised. The revised analyses were presented in conjunction with the second hypothesis. Social support nor self-esteem mediate the relationship between volunteer activity and mental health.

4. The model will be equally effective in predicting volunteer activity and mental health for (a) both males and females and (b) both African-American and white respondents.

Two presentations have been given at the Annual Meetings of the Gerontological Society of America (1997 & 1998) assessing racial and

gender differences in the study. In general, few gender differences were found. Racial differences were found in rates of participation. However, within the group of volunteers few racial differences were found in terms of volunteer behavior. The research assistant from the project who presented these two pieces is in the process of combining them for a journal article submission for summer 1999. (Early results on the volunteer activities of the men in the sample were presented at the 1995 Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Society.)

5. The longitudinal model will be effective in predicting mental health for volunteers and nonvolunteers.

This analysis is currently is process and will serve as the basis for a submission for the Annual Meetings of the Gerontological Society of America in 1999. If the abstract is accepted, after the presentation this analysis will be combined with the presentation from 1997 for a journal article submission in late 1999, as suggested above.

Due to slow start-up some analysis and dissemination is ongoing. The Principal Investigator is the only remaining paid staff member, as she is responsible for the dissemination of results. All will be concluded by the end of 1999.

Summary of current dissemination of results:

Published papers:

Halpert, S., Braunschweig, H. & Peters, N. (In press). "The use of the Beck Depression Inventory as a geriatric assessment instrument. *Clinical Gerontologist.* (draft included in May 1997 continuation grant and abstract from earlier presentation version included in May 1996 continuation grant)

Under review:

Peters-Davis, N. (In submission). "Samples in sociological research." *Journal of Applied Sociology.* (Draft attached) (Abstract from earlier presentation version included in May 1995 continuation grant)

Presentations:

Peters, N.D. & Burant, C.J. (1998). "Older volunteers: Model development and testing." Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Philadelphia. (Abstract attached)

Braunschweig, H.M., Peters, N.D. & Graham, G.C.(1998). "Differences in volunteer status between African-Americans and whites." Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Philadelphia. (Abstract attached)

Peters, N.D. & Braunschweig, H.M. (1997). "Mental health of volunteers vs. nonvolunteers." Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Cincinnati, Ohio. (Abstract included in May 1997 continuation grant)

Braunschweig, H.M. & Peters, N.D. (1997). "Gender differences and volunteer behavior." Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Cincinnati, Ohio. (Abstract included in May 1997 continuation grant)

Peters, N.D. (1997). "Volunteer behavior as an indicator of aging well." Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Toronto. (Roundtable discussion; no formal paper or abstract available)

Peters, N.D. & Braunschweig, H.M. (1996) "Predictors of volunteer activity among community dwelling older persons." Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Washington, D.C.. (Abstract included in May 1996 continuation grant)

Peters, N.D. (1995) "Aging well among retired men engaged in volunteer activities." Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Washington, D.C. (Abstract included in May 1995 continuation grant)

Note on authors: Both Halpert & Braunschweig were employed as research assistants on the project. Burant served as a statistical consultant.

Methodology

The sample was generated though the use of a purchased address and phone list. The process is referred to as Targeted Age Sampling, and is based on lists drawn from telephone directories and supplemented with automobile registration information, where accessible. Homes in the greater Philadelphia area with heads of households over 65 were targeted. Letters were sent out in batches of 50 which described the study and explained to the potential respondent that a staff member would be contacting him or her shortly. The research assistants would then call each person who had received a letter and screen for interest and eligibility. There were a total of 4,400 phone calls made. Of these 46% were either unable to be reached (due to problem with address or phone number, deceased, unable to ever get someone to answer the telephone, or ineligible based on age or work status (For a full description of the sampling process see Peters & Halpert, 1996). Of those eligible 15% agreed to be interviewed, resulting in a final sample of 356 persons. Those who refused (the other 85% of those eligible) included persons in poor health or those who did not speak English. If the potential respondent refused, attempts were made to obtain some basic demographic information.

In order to test for sample bias, especially given the low response rate, a comparison of a randomly selected subsample of 100 of those who refused and 100 of those who became part of the study, indicated that there were significant differences between the two groups on age, with the respondents being younger, education, with the respondents having more years of education, and occupation, with the respondents having higher occupational levels. There were no differences found between the respondents and the refusals on religion, marital status and volunteer status.

In terms of the characteristics of the final sample of 356, there was almost an even split on gender, with 51% male and 49% female. Most of the sample was married (49.4%) or widowed (37.9%), with 6.2% reported being divorced, 5.1% single (never married) and 1.4% separated. Sixty-five percent of the sample identified as white, with 56% identifying as Protestant, 23% as Catholic, and 12% as Jewish. Most reported their former occupational status as managerial or professional (30%), with 26% reporting their status as technical, sales or administrative, 14% as operators, 13% as service and 10% as precision production, craft or repair occupations.

Measures

Volunteer behavior was measured by a single item, ""Do you currently do any volunteer work?"

Further, a typology of volunteer activity over the life course was developed. Four types of volunteer activity were developed. The first two types, drawn from continuity theory (Zborowski, 1962; Dye et al., 1973; Chambre, 1984, 1987; Turner, 1992; Vinokur-Kaplan & Bergman, 1987; Walsh, 1986) are "continuous volunteers", those who volunteer throughout the life course, and "continuous nonvolunteers," those who never volunteered. The third type, the "new volunteer," is developed from activity theory (Havighurst, 1963; Sainer & Zander, 1971). This person never volunteered earlier in life, but has begun volunteering in later years, most probably as a substitute for lost work or family roles. The last type is the "lost volunteer," the person who once participated in volunteer activities, but now, as disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961) would predict, has withdrawn from the role.

Structural factors included age and income. Cultural factors included perceived importance and past volunteer activity. Perceived importance included level of agreement to a series of 5 statements, such as "People with unused skills and talents should make use of them by doing volunteer work." and "Volunteer work is essential to meet the community's needs." These items were developed specifically for use by persons 65 years and older. In order to determine past volunteer behavior a composite measure was created which included any prior volunteer behavior mentioned by both the current volunteers and those currently not volunteering, as well as including any volunteer work of the current volunteers which was a continuation of prior work. Two measures were utilized to assess personality factors, altruism and openness to experience. The former was measured by the Self-Report Altruism Scale (Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981), which includes 16 questions asking how often they had done activities such as given directions to a stranger, donated blood, helped an acquaintance to move households, and pointed out a clerk's error. This scale which has been utilized successfully in prior research with an older populations (Midlarsky, Kahana, & Corley, 1985) was modified for purposes of this research. Four items from the original twenty were eliminated because they could also be interpreted as indicators of volunteerism. Openness to experience was measured through the use of one section of the NEO-PI (Neurotocism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience Personality Index) (Costa & McCrae, 1992), which was developed to assess this personality trait. This scale resulted from a modification of Coan's Experience Inventory. These modifications were made to make the scale more appropriate for an older population. Since the global trait is considered to be the appropriate predictor of behavior, only the total score is utilized in this research. Health and perceived opportunity to participate were used to measure the situational factor. Health was assessed by response to a single-item, "How would you rate your health at the present time?" Self reported health has been demonstrated to be an accurate predictive

indicator of a person's health (Mossey & Shapiro, 1982). Perceived opportunity was assessed by responses to the single-item, "In general, how many volunteer activities do you feel are available to older persons in this area?"

The outcome measures focus on a multidimensional construct of mental health. For this discussion, two outcome measures will be utilized, daily affect and depression, linked to the earlier discussion of successful aging. Life satisfaction has been dropped from these analyses due to poor reliability. Daily affect is measured by the PGC Affect Checklist, developed by Lawton et al. (1990). This list contains twelve items. Respondents are asked to rate "the way you feel today" using a 5-point response format ("excellent," "good," "fair," "poor," "very poor"). The items include: health, pain/discomfort, energetic, annoyed, feelings of warmth, interested, happy, irritated, depressed, worried, content and sad/blue. The scale ranged from 19 to 50 with a mean of 41 and Cronbach's alpha of .77.

The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Index (CES-D) will be used to measure the respondents' overall depression. The CES-D has been used with a variety of populations. The scale ranged from 0 to 45, with a mean of 9 and Cronbach's alpha of .84. Using a standard cutoff of 17, 13% of the sample would be classified as clinically depressed.

Abstract

This research was undertaken to uncover the predictors of volunteerism for older persons and to determine the mental health benefits of such activity. Factors associated with volunteer behavior if volunteerism is viewed as a type of productive role for elderly adults, the predictors of the activity can be determined through an examination of cultural, structural, personality and situational determinants of roles. Recent literature suggests that volunteerism is an appropriate sub-division of productive work. Herzog et al (1989) define productive activities as activities that earn or save money or that help others in ways for which a market value can be plausibly imputed(p. S13), and include volunteerism as part of the three domains of this activity, paid work, unpaid work, and help provided to others. Volunteerism can also be viewed as a legitimate form of productivity in that (1) new skills are learned or old skills are adapted; (2) support is provided for institutions and causes and (3) the need to give back is served, especially for older persons (Kouri, 1990). The roots of current theory on determinants of volunteerism as a form of productive aging go back to the early 1960s when researchers such as Zborowski (1962) began to study leisure activities among older persons. These theories have included disengagement (Cumming & Henry, 1961), activity (Havighurst, 1963), substitution (Carp, 1968; Chambr, 1984), continuity (Payne, 1977) and exchange (Blau, 1964; Turner, 1992). Empirical evidence for the theories has been inconsistent, however, and no one theory has emerged as the leading framework. Prior research Several researchers have suggested that the predictors of or motivations to, engage in volunteer behavior are too complex and multi-dimensional to be determined by one factor or theoretical perspective. Much of the debate in the literature has focused on whether older volunteers are motivated by altruism or self-interest. Empirical evidence suggests that motivations may not stem from one or the other, but a combination of factors. Recently, Warburton et al (2001) found that the benefits that older volunteers report imply both altruism and egoism. The volunteers in the sample were significantly more likely than the nonvolunteers to indicate feeling useful, helping those in need, gaining pleasure and satisfaction, and meeting people as perceived benefits of participating in volunteering. Previously, Okun and Eisenberg (1992) through a factor analysis of volunteers motives included in a survey of 242 volunteers over the age of 55, uncovered three factors which they labeled knowledge (To acquire new skills and experiences), value-expressive (I feel a personal obligation to help people in trouble) and social-adjustive (Other people want me to do volunteering). This three factor approach resulted in a much stronger ability to classify intent to continue volunteering through

discriminant analysis than a unidimensional approach. Similarly, Morrow-Howell and Mui (1989) found through interviews with volunteers in a program that trained older volunteers to care for their older neighbors, that female respondents cited multiple reasons for volunteering, as opposed to a single reason. Zhong and Hong (1994) suggested that previous approaches, limited to reliance on one theoretical perspective (such as activity) cannot begin to explain the complexity underlying volunteer behavior. Their findings found strong support both for the economic theory of human capital, as persons with higher education and income were more likely to participate in volunteer work, and partial support for activity theory, as part-time employed persons tended to spend the most time in volunteer work. They concluded that multidisciplinary approaches are necessary to understand volunteer behavior.