HOW CAN VOLUNTEERING IMPROVE THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL LIFE OF THE ELDERLY

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents several outcomes from a qualitative research study on the topic of senior volunteering. The author presents selected findings and conclusions from qualitative data, which was collected from coordinators working with volunteers in various non-profit organizations across Slovak republic and from senior volunteers themselves. Grounded theory according to Strauss and Corbin was the main research design. Semi-standardized interviews were realized and complemented with various other textual data sources. The findings support the thesis that volunteering in a higher age can significantly improve the individual life of seniors, although many barriers and obstacles were identified too. The paper focuses on effects of senior volunteering, motivation, barriers and other interesting facts.

UDC & KEYWORDS

■ UDC: 304, 316.4 ■ OLDER PEOPLE ■ VOLUNTEERING
■ NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS ■ MOTIVATION ■ BARRIERS

INTRODUCTION

Volunteering can play a significant role in people's lives as they move from work to retirement. When people retire from paid work and are in good health, one way for them to keep active and involved in their communities is to volunteer (Davis Smith, J., 1998). Recently I have been working on a qualitative survey on the topic of senior volunteering and would like to present a few interesting outcomes.

Methodology

The research project started in late 2009 and first partial outcomes were published in 2010 (Pavelek, L., 2010a, Pavelek, L., 2010b). The research sample consisted of fifteen older volunteers and fifteen volunteer coordinators or representatives of non-profit organizations working with volunteers. The volunteers were located in the municipal district of Trnava (Slovak republic), the coordinators were chosen from all-over the country. The sampling method used was snowball sampling, and the method used for data collecting was a semi-standardized interview. This data was complemented with various other textual data sources, such as documents from the NGO's (formal and informal), electronic documents and e-mail conversations. All the collected data was analyzed with Atlas.ti according to the open and axial coding processes of the grounded theory approach.

Results

Generally, all of the interviewed senior volunteers saw volunteering as a positive phenomenon, which of course is an understandable fact, since I deliberately sought out people working in this field. Rather interesting are the views on elderly volunteers from the perspective of representatives of various organizations that work with volunteers. When discussing this issue they almost always expressed their feelings positively, as indicated by one of the interviewed

participants: "I definitely think, that senior citizens should volunteer (...) I mean, retired people, whether on early disability or retirement. This work should, in my opinion help them to improve the mental state (...) and physical condition."

The positive effect of volunteering in later life (mostly psychological factors) further stressed another approached woman, who indicated that from her experience volunteering in old age helps to eliminate negative phenomena such as "feelings of inferiority, uselessness or the fact called the empty nest syndrome". Another one said, when asked about the meaning of volunteering in higher age, that older people have volunteered to act as it would "feel useful and many of them have invaluable experience that (...) may be of great benefit. There is also substantial demolition of barriers between the generations." The interviewed people agreed on the fact that was very well formulated by one of the coordinators: "Overall, it is important to promote volunteering at any age."

The overall process of senior volunteering can be illustrated using the paradigm model according to Strauss & Corbin (1998) consisting of casual conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies and consequences (Figure 1).

It can be concluded, that the significant majority of the interviewed expressed their desire to help others and emphasized the care and compassion, which enable them to carry out volunteer activities. Volunteers saw this as a simple matter, which needs no further explanation. In the words of one of them: "I just want to help. I do not want no money".

Volunteering for many of my interviewed volunteers meant active, meaningful leisure time activity, where they can do a good job. One of them told me her motto: "What I want to be done to me, I do to the others and what I do not want to be done do me I do not." In an interview with another has been said: "If I go somewhere on a voluntary basis, it's because I enjoy the job (...) it satisfies any of my needs that arise from the interest in this work."

For some older people volunteering played a big role in the process of transition to retirement. In the debate on the needs for adapting to changed circumstances, the volunteers indicated that they were somehow forced to rearrange their lives to adapt to the new situation. They also reported a series of specific examples of how they can continue to contribute meaningfully in the form of volunteering, as this opportunity has been taken in the work environment.

In addition to the various mentioned facts, it is needed to be aware that many people are involved in voluntary activities because they were simply asked to do so. We can see all the factors summarized in the table below, using the three-factor model of motivation (Fitch, R.T., 1987) and multi-factor model (Clary E. et. al, 1998).

In interviews, I focused on the barriers that older people experience when trying to become volunteers. In my sample,

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Figure 1: Paradigm model of senior volunteering

Source: Author

Table 1: Identified factors of motivation to volunteering

Identified motives	Three Factor model of motivation	Multi-factor model of motivation	Quote
Unselfishness	Personal	Values	"I just want to help. I do not want no money, I do not want any rewards, just help." "I just like to help others, not considering the fact why."
Advisability	Personal	Understanding	"If I go somewhere voluntarily, it's because I enjoy the job (...) It satisfies any needs that arise from the interest in this work.", "I feel good, I satisfies me (volunteering)."
Reciprocity	Altruistic	Esteem	"I want to return something at least in that form. I believe I can help someone this way at least."
Activity	Social	Esteem	"I wanted any work that I did not just sit at home.". "I am among other people."

Source: Author

I did not discover any cultural barriers. This does not however mean that these types of obstacles for volunteering do not exist in Slovak republic. I met with the barriers that can be defined as "the perception of volunteers" and "practical barriers to volunteer activities".

The barriers in terms of negative public perceptions of volunteers can be illustrated on the following examples. One of the volunteers indicated how her activities are received in her immediate surroundings: "The people in my environment think that only fools do this type of work in this age." Another similarly argues that the problem is in: "our people's minds. It is necessary to do some work in here. Mainly with the question: why do you do anything when you do not get any money for it?". One coordinator stressed: "Volunteering is generally understood as an activity for young people ..."

Psychological barriers are also important. We can illustrate the following example from an interview with a volunteer coordinator: "My grandmother is 76 years old, she loves children and animals. She comes to us, still talking about how alone she feels. The usual stuff. She goes to a psychiatrist and tells her she has depressions. I tried to convince her to go to some orphanage or shelter. She claims that she does not hear or she does not have any energy. But she was babysitting the neighbor's children and was fully excited about it (...). Bad thing is that older people see obstacles in many cases."

In my survey sample, I also met with the barriers that are described as practical barriers. These are related to health problems, mobility problems and financial difficulties. From

an interview with a deputy of a non-profit organization working with volunteers: "One experience: one older woman wanted to do any job, just so she can go out of home, but she wanted to have at least some of the travel and subsistence costs covered, but the majority of civil associations and non-profit organizations that need volunteers do not even have that much money (...), there should be some support from the state for these people".

Many practical barriers relate to communication. "As for the barriers, it might be necessary to work on some bulletin boards, informing these people where to go, where offers of voluntary work for elderly people are (...) they cannot know anything when they are sitting at home." "We have young volunteers but it still would be nice to involve older people (...). We want to work on some database, the only problem is, it's just on the internet, and many older people do not go to the net (...) there has to be any other way."

In the survey I also focused on cooperation of elderly volunteers with volunteers in the working age, benefits of volunteering in later life and the problems that organizations may encounter in the process of involving older people as volunteers for their activities.

The experiences of the volunteers themselves and representatives of organizations focused on promoting inter-generational cooperation among the volunteers. Older volunteers positively evaluated their experience from working with other age groups, particularly children and youth. Examples include a project where older volunteers from met with children to work together during Christmas time. "They met us with children in workshops. We prepared

Christmas cards and tree decorations. I felt very well between them." It is therefore possible to conclude that inter-generational face-to-face volunteering appears to have a strong positive impact and to be an appropriate stimulation to perform volunteer activities.

Another phenomena I have focused on, is the advantages of volunteering in old age. In my survey sample, I was able to identify the particular advantages of individual and social benefits for the community and organizations. The impact of volunteering on the individual health of my respondents felt unable to assess, although it can be identified (Pavelek, L., 2010c), for example formal volunteering may decrease the risk of depression in later life (Li, Y., Ferraro, K. F., 2005).

Individual benefits can include life-long skills and experiences of the seniors (Rochester, C., Hutchinson R, 2002) that can be transmitted to future generations. A volunteer coordinator formulated a clear position: "Older citizens, especially seniors, should operate in voluntary activities, because they have rich experience and they are useful for young people." But the process of learning and enrichment also works reciprocally. According to another interviewed, the senior citizens "... learn something new from other volunteers. I feel that a few years ago more work was done in various interest associations, which we now call volunteer centers, and it was fine."

Benefits for the organizations are clear. Older volunteers serve as the stock of social capital (Putnam, R. D., 2000), and even sometimes appear to be a surprisingly vigorous in comparison to their younger colleagues. Example serves to illustrate the practice of respondents applied to the helpline. "... but when I think about it, our supervisors are older volunteers. They have my admiration because in the ten years of our helpline working they were always able to align their responsibilities so that they are always on duty as opposed to young volunteers, who still have responsibilities with the school. (...) So, older volunteers have in my opinion better endurance and beliefs"

Discussion

Most of the research participants were satisfied with their volunteering, which was widely considered as an opportunity to participate in something that is meaningful and fun on the one hand, and less stressful than paid employment on the other. Volunteering can be seen as a way to keep the rhythm of life, such as the possibility of obtaining opportunities for lifelong learning as a way to productive aging. The participants - senior volunteers and representatives of non-governmental organizations promote the volunteering of the elderly, no negative statements that would copy stereotypes or ageistic attitudes have occurred in the individual cases. It can therefore be concluded, that volunteering of the elderly can be seen as an effective way to prevent such stereotypical attitudes. Volunteering thus eliminates the myth of the so-called "inactive senior".

For some seniors volunteering means a powerful way to develop abilities and skills already gained in professional life that fit well into the constellation of other activities. Volunteering is here a tool for gaining significant psychological and emotional satisfaction. Acquired new skills and abilities do not only enrich seniors themselves, but these pass their life experiences and positive values to youngsters. This phenomenon is important for intergenerational harmony and solidarity between generations. Volunteering of the elderly may therefore be an important factor in the elimination of inter-generational tensions. If we will have older and younger volunteers working in organizations alongside, it is possible that not

only the perception of older people in society will be changed and stereotypes will be broken, but also the values of older people which according to the irreversible demographic trends will gain a more significant influence will be easily understandable and acceptable by the younger generation. Volunteering could in this way help the elderly to a more positive perception in the society.

Volunteering is an important factor that stimulates positive quality of senior's life. Seniors who volunteer and representatives of NGOs have repeatedly reported that volunteering, according to their personal experience, can degrade such phenomena as inferiority complex, feeling useless, loneliness and depression. The role, that volunteering plays in the context of social work can be demonstrated here. It can be seen as a method or tool of social work in working with older people, to motivate them and improve their lives. It should therefore be offered and opportunities for the elderly should be created. Another problem that should be mentioned is the question if elderly volunteers should be treated differently than the younger ones (Baldock, C.V., In: Warburton, J., Oppenheimer, M., 2000). Volunteering may depend from the cycle of life (Omoto, A.M., Snyder, M., Martino, C., 2000), but this thesis could be proved only with a longitudinal research study.

The presence of religion practiced in the past or in the present, and the presence of "helping ethics" (Davis Smith, J., Gay, P., 2005) were important factors in the background of many volunteers and their motivation, regardless of the type of volunteer work performed (also many volunteer activities were supported by the church in the local communities where the participants worked). The same finding applies to the family environment. This confirms the assumptions that see volunteering as an important value, and also as a stock of social capital.

I assume, that it is possible to claim that the family environment is a determinant of volunteering and provides an important basis for the development of positive perceptions of volunteering and supports its performance. But the family environment is not the only starting point of volunteering, it is important to go further and try to analyze relationships outside the family. Then we can say that it is the individual's social capital what creates social networks outside the family and helps to overcome stereotypical attitudes towards seniors and the elderly as already described. If we try to summarize the findings based on these facts, we can conclude that family is fundamental for volunteering of the elderly, because it supports their activities, while allowing reciprocity especially in informal volunteering. Outside the family, then, it is a senior's social capital, network of relationships and interactions that creates room for further actions. The stronger these bonds are, the more consistent volunteer activities are performed and active aging can be achieved.

In my research sample I did not find any signs of geographic stability (Davis Smith, J., 1998) being connected to volunteering. Several reasons might serve as an explanation for this phenomenon, the most likely seems to be that community involvement and strong social ties are common in Western countries (especially the U.S.) from a historical perspective, and in post-communist countries this simply is not the case. The concept of citizenship in the countries oppressed by a totalitarian way of governance is always in the background, voluntary engagement in social and cultural associations is weak. The matter of public interest in the eyes of the general population is someone else - "the state", "the politicians" etc. - but not citizens themselves. There might exist a generally accepted notion that the laws are

made to be broken, but there is also a permanent fear of state control present. People in such circumstances feel weak, exploited and unhappy. Such cultural patterns could persist in the lives of post-communist countries citizens. This theory is supported by the findings of my research sample on the public perception of volunteering. Elderly volunteers and representatives of non-profit organizations are constantly faced with a lack of understanding for their activities. They say that volunteering seen by the public as a kind of an inefficient activity. People have the idea that only activities that bring material benefits, or rewards, can be considered meaningful (Onyx, J., Warburton, J., 2003). The involvement outside personal interests is thus low. However, the trend in a post-modern world, is just the opposite, citizens should be involved in public interest. Social and political networks should be organized horizontally, not hierarchically. Thus, in these communities, the important task is to strengthen the civic solidarity, civic participation and integrity. In this context, volunteering is a fundamental phenomenon and its importance in the globalized society of the third millennium will only increase. Volunteering helps the civil society to eliminate negative phenomena at the individual and societal level. Organizations working with volunteers felt the benefits of experience, dedication and capabilities of older people and their long-term service (Pavelek, L., 2012). These factors can surpass the disadvantages of volunteering in later life. The problem seems to be the process of recruiting new senior volunteers. Therefore, the organization will need to develop new strategies to reach out to people who come from a background where the volunteering tradition did not exist. This could be achieved by: better marketing, "entrepreneurial" approach and creating opportunities at organizations. In short, organizations must be able to show seniors what they can offer.

Representatives of NGOs in my research sample had a problem with the way of addressing elderly volunteers. Internet as a contact method is not appropriate in this age group. Proven ways to search for older volunteers include (Rochester, C., Hutchinson, R., 2002):

- Direct addressing in places where it is likely that older people will be present, such as surgeries, day centers, churches etc.
- Contacting people with whom they come into contact, such as social workers, caregivers, health care professionals.
- Reaching out for facilities where potential volunteers are already organized, such as pensioners clubs and other organizations.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to very briefly describe a few outcomes from my survey on the topic of volunteering of older people. When we focus directly on senior volunteering, it is necessary to understand the role played by volunteering in the lives of older people undergoing the transition from paid work to retirement. Volunteer organizations should try to maximize the benefits in broadening their base of recruitment to include those groups of older people currently under-represented as volunteers, and to structure and organize volunteering opportunities so as to enhance the benefits for all stakeholder groups – the volunteers, organizations, and wider community.

This particular topic will be further elaborated in my upcoming work on this problem entitled „Volunteering as a motivational factor of older people“, and also in a co-

operative research on benefits of social participation in later life planned for 2013.

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