



The Effects of Senior Volunteering – How Does Volunteering of the Elderly Influence Their Individual and Social life? (A Qualitative Research Study of Slovak Elderly Volunteers)

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Author's contribution

The only author LP performed the whole research work. Author LP wrote the first draft of the paper. Author LP read and approved the final manuscript.

Research Article

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ABSTRACT

Aims: To find effects, motivation and barriers of senior volunteering in Slovak republic. To evaluate the impact on health, individual and social life of the elderly.

Study Design: Grounded theory (according to Strauss & Corbin's approach).

Place and Duration of Study: The municipal district of Trnava, Slovak republic, between November 2009 and September 2010.

Methodology: The research sample consisted of fifteen senior 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 were 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 were analyzed with the software Atlas.ti according to the open and axial coding processes of the grounded theory approach.

Results: Open and axial coding procedures helped to develop the paradigmatic model of the process of senior volunteering.

Conclusion: The findings support the thesis that volunteering in a higher age can

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significantly improve the individual life of seniors, although many barriers and obstacles were identified too.

Keywords: Older people; volunteering; non-profit organizations; motivation; barriers.

DEFINITIONS, ACRONYMS, ABBREVIATIONS

Volunteering: *Carrying out tasks or providing services for individuals or community organizations without financial recompense.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Many scientists point out that the emergence of a global cosmopolitan society will be linked to the revival of ideas and practices of civic culture. In a promise of a global civil society alternative visions can be produced and exchanged. On the other hand, several authors claim that this recent development has brought up many negatives, such as weaker solidaristic international relationships which bring national self-interest and individualism to the fore. There are calls for new approaches of the governance of relationships between the rich and the poor populations around the world which go beyond the traditional formal development institutions, national frameworks and narrower understandings of market-based development models. Maybe (international) volunteering can be, in a way, seen as a process which could potentially shape a new way of thinking and trying to, humanize globalization. Davis Smith [1] introduces the term, cross-national volunteering. In this paper I would like to focus on senior volunteering and point out interesting facts about this phenomena, based on a recent research project of mine. There are of course limitations of the literature review in this paper, the United States alone, and also almost all western countries have an enormous research literature on senior volunteering. This is not the case in Slovak republic, where the phenomena can be classified as new and quite untouched. Many researches into why people volunteer show, that there is often a mix of altruistic and self interest motives. Older people, in particular, are more likely to volunteer for social contact and to be active. They may have time to spare – but whether they choose to volunteer is another question altogether. For some older people volunteering is seen as an opportunity to put something back into society; for others it provides a chance to continue learning new skills and tasting new experiences. For many older people volunteering plays an important role in the transition process. Attention is put to the contribution of volunteering in helping to fill the void sometimes felt upon retirement.

Senior volunteers can be classified into three groups:

- Lifelong volunteers - those who volunteer because they have always done so
- Serial volunteers - those who have come back to volunteering later in life following a break for work and family responsibilities
- Trigger volunteers - those who are inspired by retirement to volunteer for the first time [2].

Seniors who had been active in volunteering throughout their lives usually draw attention to what can perhaps best be described as the existence of an “ethical legacy”, informed both by religious and humanistic impulses and a strong history of family commitment to volunteering and service. Older people stress the values their parents had implanted – the

importance of lending a hand, helping others and joining organizations – which they see as being fundamental in influencing them in their decision to volunteer. Many authors also point to a link between volunteering and geographic place in that many of the volunteers lived in or near the area they were born, or had been in their present neighborhood for many years, and had built up extensive social networks based on social capital. According to Robert Putnam social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. He further elaborates that this that, ‘civic virtue’ is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital [3].

1.1 Benefits of Volunteering

It is almost indisputable that the community benefits from volunteers through the services they deliver and through a more active civil society. Indeed, it may be that older people have a particular role here. However, the evidence also suggests that volunteers benefit as well. It may be that volunteering meets a fundamental human need to be useful. Researches show fairly clearly that volunteering is associated with better health outcomes, which are particularly important for people as they age. Thus, volunteers are shown to live longer, have better psychological and physical health, and are less likely to be lonely or socially isolated. Researches also show that volunteering can help people withstand some of the losses associated with later life, such as widowhood or retirement.

1.1.1 Health benefits

The concept of volunteering and health of older people generally suggests several health benefits for the seniors. But there are some contradictory opinions about the benefits of informal volunteering as opposed to formal volunteering and whether health benefits are for self-reported health problems or diagnosed health problems. Here are some findings:

- Formal volunteering lowers depression levels for older people (65+) and provides mental health benefits [4].
- Volunteering decreases self-reported (though not diagnosed) health problems, slows depression increase and reduces morbidity rates (a longitudinal study from the USA carried out on people over the age of 70 who volunteered over 100 hours in 1993).
- There is consistent evidence that morbidity rates, functional health indices, self-reported health and life satisfaction are affected by formal and informal volunteering. Further it can be said that formal volunteering has a direct impact on well-being, functional health and longevity, and this impact is net of initial health levels, socio-economic status, or informal social integration [5].

1.1.2 Social benefits

Volunteering also influences the individual’s social life. Many authors examine these relationships. For example can volunteering be understood as an expression of active social engagement or as a form of strengthening of informal networks and social support systems. Voluntary work also leads to increased social contact with a wide range of people. This, in turn, increases the chances of older people finding social support, useful contacts, and helpful information [5]. It is also suggested that older people who volunteer have multiple and valued social roles, and they are in a position to assist others while gaining information

and skills for themselves. They are likely to maintain significantly higher levels of well-being, a strong sense of their own worth, than those who do not volunteer.

1.1.3 Self-reported benefits

There is a number of reasons why older people stay in volunteer experience. Some of these suggest a number of benefits of volunteering to the older volunteer like for example keeping busy and active, feeling like you are doing something useful and active, both in the actual volunteer activity and in contributing to a worthwhile organization/project, a sense of taking responsibility, a sense of contributing to an organization's decision making, an opportunity to learn new skills, an opportunity to develop existing interests and skills or an opportunity for social interaction and meeting new people [6].

Not all volunteering activities may be equally beneficial. There are some indications that too much volunteering, or stressful volunteering, or volunteering that lacks social support may not be beneficial. Volunteering of seniors works the best way when it provides the following: the possibility of maintaining physical and cognitive activity, information and encouragement to maintain or improve good health practices, strong personal emotional support, the opportunity to contribute to the well-being of others and strong links into supportive community networks.

1.1.4 Benefits for the communities and organizations

The volunteering of older people benefits the community by creating social capital. This is important for a healthy, thriving community. Increasing the contribution that older people make to society through volunteer activities helps to reduce some of the negative impacts of the process of population ageing. Other benefits for the communities involve: benefits from a society with a healthy and active older population through the skills and experiences that can be maintained and passed on to the community generally, the networks and trust created, and the reduced pressure on the health system.

Older volunteers have several qualities to offer a volunteer-involving organization. These include the following:

- Maturity – older people have lived through enough experiences to enable them to understand the problems of others.
- Skills – they have also spent decades perfecting all kinds of skills.
- Availability – people who have retired from paid work or have finished child rearing tend to have more spare time and can be flexible about when they participate.
- Loyalty – older people spend more time on their volunteering and remain longer with their organizations than younger people.
- Numbers – older people make up an ever-increasing proportion of the population and organizations cannot afford to ignore this important resource.
- Confidence and authority - older volunteers were felt to be able to indicate if an activity were too much, to ask questions about the way things were run, to manage themselves, and to nurture younger volunteers.
- Patience and tolerance - older volunteers were felt to be more stable, have a calmer head, see issues from a number of perspectives, and work at a steadier pace.

- Commitment and continuity - older people were felt to be more reliable, be more willing to see a project through, be more tenacious, have an interest in the activity, and be more altruistic than younger volunteers [6].

1.1.5 Benefits for the private sector

Volunteering of older people can be viewed as a transition out of paid employment or as a step back into paid employment. This can be understood as beneficial for the private sector. Several studies suggest that volunteering as a way of transitioning out of full-time employment towards retirement could include combining part-time employment and volunteer activities. This means that older people could in a way delay full retirement. The private sector could benefit from this prolonged employment amongst older people and the retention of corporate knowledge and skills that goes with this, whilst having the opportunity to train up new workers. As such, the private sector needs to play a role in promoting older volunteering as a step towards retirement. Some of the literature even talks about volunteering as a mentor within the private sector. However, the majority of authors agree that volunteering should never be used to replace paid employment [7].

Another way in which the private sector can benefit from older volunteering is where volunteering is used as an avenue back into employment. In this situation older people who have been unemployed or retrenched through the changing skills required by the work environment can use volunteering as a way of updating their skills and creating networks to facilitate new employment options. In this situation the private sector benefits from the new skills gained by these volunteers and a more skills-rich workforce.

Thus, volunteering has social and health benefits for older people, but only if it is part of a balanced, healthy lifestyle. Too much volunteering may cause stress, just as too much paid work can cause stress. Flexible options need to be available to older people so that they can include some volunteer activities into their life. In addition, it is critical that assumptions are not made about older volunteers. For example volunteers may wish to undertake volunteering across a span of activities and organizations, and not necessarily in traditional roles.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research project started in late 2009 and first partial outcomes were published in 2010 and 2012 [8,9,10,11]. The research sample consisted of fifteen older volunteers and fifteen volunteer coordinators or representatives of non-profit organizations working with volunteers. Among the older volunteers there were twelve women and three men, whom all have reached the retirement age, that is around sixty years of age in Slovakia (the age when a person is eligible to retire in Slovakia varies according to several conditions). 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 were complemented with various other textual data sources, such as documents from the NGO's (formal and informal), electronic documents and e-mail conversations. The author acknowledges the limitations associated with the modest data collection and informal analysis. All the collected data were analyzed with Atlas.ti (arguably the best and most usable QDA – qualitative data analysis software available) according to the open and axial coding processes of the grounded theory approach.

The general research questions were the following:

- What is the motivation for volunteering among older people?
- What motivational factors can be identified?
- What are the reasons for participating in voluntary activities?
- What barriers do elderly volunteers encounter?
- What is the connection between elderly volunteering and individual's health, community commitment, social capital etc.?

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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."*

3.1 Results

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 old 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 [12] consisting of casual conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies and consequences (Fig. 1).

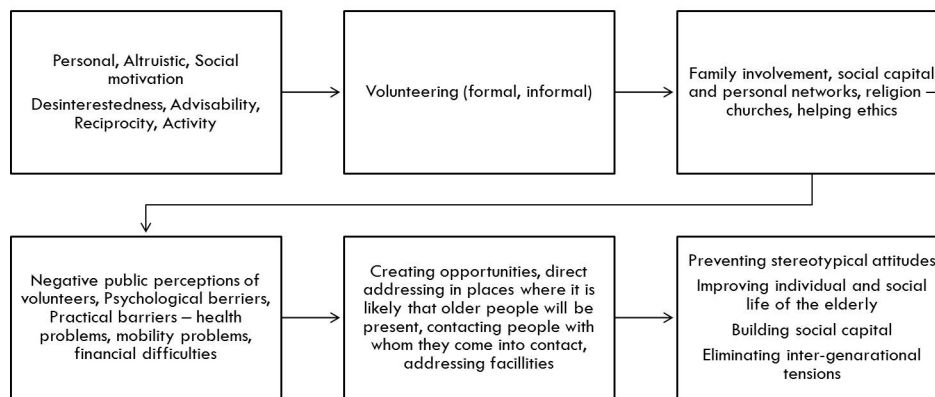


Fig. 1. Paradigm model of senior volunteering

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 any 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 frequently 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 [13] and multi-factor model [14].

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

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 any 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."

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 one 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 said: *"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 neighbors children and was fully excited about it (...). The bad thing is that older people see obstacles in many cases."*

In my research 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, that it's just on the internet, and many older people do not go to the net (...) there has to be any other way."*

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 be a strong positive impact and 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.

Individual benefits can include life-long skills and experiences of the seniors 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, 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".

3.2 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.

The presence of religion practiced in the past or in the present, and the presence of "helping ethics" 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 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. 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. 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:

- 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,
- Addressing a facility where potential volunteers are already organized as pensioners clubs and other organizations.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study may be in a way evident for international researchers. It has to be noted that they are beneficial for the scientific community in the field of social work in the Slovak republic and also for the NGO's working with volunteers (senior and in general), because there were not much data if any at all on this topic. It is evident that there had been a fundamental shift over the last three decades in such topics as civic engagement, informal social ties, tolerance and trust etc. It is also obvious that volunteering can serve as an important factor in overcoming these problems. 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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COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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