RECRUITING OLDER VOLUNTEERS: FINDINGS FROM THE BELGIAN AGEING STUDIES

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Abstract

Although there is a significant body of work concerning voluntary work, hardly any attention is given to volunteering of older individuals. Moreover, the potential volunteers among older adults is even less examined. Next to volunteering among older adults, the neighbourhood becomes more salient when people age and this due to their more intense use and time spent in the neighbourhood. In response to these lacunae, the main purpose of this contribution is to examine the impact of subjective neighbourhood features on the recruitment potential for volunteering among older people. This study uses data collected from the Belgian Ageing Studies. 59.977 adults aged sixty and over living self-reliantly in 127 Flemish municipalities in Belgium participated in this study. A binary logistic regression is applied to analyse the key variables characterizing potential volunteers. Our findings stress the need for recognizing the crucial importance of the locality when recruiting older adults for volunteer activities.

Key words: *volunteering, older adults, neighbourhood, environmental gerontology.*

JEL Classification: I00

1. INTRODUCTION

Ageist views continue to be a feature of many of the contemporary discourses about the roles of older people in society. Volunteering and theories such as active ageing can counteract these negative ageist views and can create a more positive perspective in which older adults can engage

in a role as active agents in their life course and participate in society (WHO,2002: 12; Walker,2005; Choi,2003). Research on volunteering in later life shows positive effects of volunteering on health, well-being, self fulfilment, self-esteem and life satisfaction. In addition volunteering is proved to be beneficial for older people's feelings of freedom (Booth et al,2000; Drooglever & van der Meer,2006). Next to the number of older people that already participate in voluntary work, scholars have pointed out the importance of taking into account the 'recruitment potential', i.e. the number of older people that doesn't volunteer but is willing to do so. In Belgium, for instance, it is found that there is a considerable potential for recruiting older people into volunteering (16.4%) (Dury et al.,2010). The main reason why people don't volunteer is because they haven't been asked for (Marriott Seniors Volunteerism Study,1991; Hodgkinson & Weitzman,1996). Fischer and Schaffer (1993) argue that 80 to 85% of the volunteers have been recruited through other members. Word-of-mouth appears to be on of the most effective recruit campaign and the most common one is neighbours telling neighbours (Freeman,1997; Hodgkinson & Weitzman,1996). Following this line, this paper aims to examine the impact of subjective neighbourhood features on the recruitment potential for volunteering among older people.

1.1. The neighbourhood in late life

Several studies indicate that the significance of the local environment increases with age (Cagney & Wen,2007). Many older people spent more time in their neighbourhood because their action radius has decreased due to a declining physical health or decreased mobility (Nair,2005; Drooglever et al.,2006). The process of a decrease in action radius can be demonstrated through the model of Van der Meer (2006). She portrays the world of people through three circles. Each circle represents social and spatial activities. The first and most external circle represents the situation of employment. The second layer consists out of activities outside the home like leisure activities, doing voluntary work, etc. The third and final layer embodies home-based activities. The model shows that when people age each layer ceases gradually from the most external one to the home-based circle. The decrease of every layer does not only affect productive activities, but also affects the spatial action radius (Van der Meer,2006; Peace et al.,2007). The withdrawal of every layer is different for every adult (Smith & Gerstorf,2004).

1.2. Potential older volunteers and their neighbourhood

To date, there has been no research on the relationship between potential older volunteers and the neighbourhood. Expanding our literature search, there are some, although these remain scarce, studies on the relationship between context and older volunteers. These studies focus primarily on the impact of urbanisation and the role of deprivation or disadvantaged areas (Tolsma et al.,2009; Van der Meer,2008). According to Wuthnow (1998), however, volunteering among older adults is not influenced by the difference between urban and rural areas but rather by characteristics of the place of residence. People who enjoy living in their neighbourhood indicated to be more likely to engage in formal and informal volunteering (Home Office Citizenship Survey,2004). Locke and colleagues (2001) show some nuanced results and conclude that people might be motivated for volunteering by reason of their commitment to their living area rather than as a result of feeling good about the living area.

1.3. Research aim

The study was designed to examine features which characterize potential volunteers among older adults. The research question of this study was: to what extent can the recruitment potential for volunteering among older adults be explained through the social dimension of the neighbourhood when basic socio-demographic and individual resources are taken into account?

2. DATA AND METHODS

2.1. Design

Data for this study have been used from the research project 'Belgian Ageing Studies' (BAS) assessing quality of life and living conditions of older people. The main purpose of this research project was to collect knowledge about the perceptions of various aspects related to quality of life –e.g. neighbourhood features, physical health, wellbeing, civic participation … The BAS applied a method named peer-research. It embraced older people not only as the research group, but also as essential partners of the project. Working with a peer-research system enriched the research-design and resulted in more complete questionnaires and a high response rate (between 65 and 85%). A more complete description of the interview design can be found in Verté et al. (2007).

2.2. Participants

The range of the survey consisted of 57.977 older people (aged 60 and above) living self-reliantly in 127 cities and towns in the Flemish part of Belgium. The local government of every city and town drew a random sample from the population register of the inhabitants, applying stratified quota where the proportion of features as gender and age (60 to 69, 70 to 79 and 80 years and over) are identical as in the underlying population. Consequently, every sample was representative for each municipality.

2.3. Measures

The dependent variable in this study was being a potential volunteer. In the questionnaire, older adults had to indicate whether they would like to participate in voluntary activities in the future (0= no: not potential volunteer or 1= yes: potential volunteer).

The first set of independent variables consisted of *factors measuring the social dimension of the neighbourhood.* These factors are subjective data on local living conditions that are collected among residents who rate features of their local area, which is a personal interpretation concerning the 'area' one resides (Bowling and Stafford, 2007). The factors have been measured as follows: 'How often do you have social contacts with people in your neighbourhood?', 'How satisfied are you with these social contacts?', 'To what extent do you feel involved in your neighbourhood?', 'How often do you get out during the evening?', and 'Would you say that this is a neighbourhood you enjoy living in?'. Each item was scored on a 5-point Likert scale but was recoded into dummy variables. Respondents rated the 'frequency of social contacts' in 'never to once per week' (0) or 'more than once per week' (1) and the 'frequency of going out during the evening' in 'never to less than once per month' (0) or 'monthly to weekly' (1). The response categories for 'satisfaction with social contacts in the neighbourhood' were 'not satisfied' (0) or 'satisfied' (1). Participants specified their level of involvement' as 'not involved to semi-involved' (0) or 'involved to very involved' (1). To assess 'the perception of the neighbourhood' participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction 'not enjoyable to live'(0) or 'enjoyable to live' (1).

Regarding *the individual resources* we measured physical health and level of education. In order to assess the physical health, a scale (Cronbach's α = 0.89) was developed in accordance with the manual of the 'MOS Short-form General Health Survey' (Medical Outcome Scale, Kempen et.al.,1995). The scale ranged from 1 [physically restricted] to 2 [physically healthy]. The level of education of an older individual was dichotomised (0= low educated (secondary low or below), 1= high educated (secondary high or above).

The third and final set of variables is *socio-demographic factors*, including respondent's characteristics as age and marital status. Age was divided into three categories: 60-69 years, 70-79 years and 80 years and over. Marital status had five answer possibilities (married, never married, divorced, living together, widowed).

2.4. Statistical analysis

First, a bivariate analysis was provided to describe differences between potential volunteers and non-volunteers. Variables whose bivariate test results were significant were retained for a second step, multicollinearity analysis. This step involved a calculation of the variance inflation factor values (VIF) and the tolerance statistics to reveal whether a high correlation among the independent variables exists. Finally, a binary logistic regression was conducted. This specific logistic regression allowed exploring the relationships of several predictors' variables to a dependent, categorical dichotomous variable. All independent variables were evaluated in terms of their predictive power (Field,2006). The values of exp(B), also called the odds ratio, describe the probability that an older individual is a potential volunteer divided by the probability that one is not potential (Field,2006). Given the large sample size, statistical significance was set at p<.001 for all analyses.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results of the binary logistic regression. The entire model, including all variables, is statistically significant and has a good fit (χ^2= 27.436, p= .001). The model shows a variance between 10.3% (Cox and Snell R²) and 17.0% (Nagelkerke R²) in potential volunteers, and divides correctly 82.6% of the respondents. Considering the first set of predictors, the *neighbourhood factors*, two variables are important. First, the variable getting out during the evening (z(1)= 176.972, B= .448, p= .000) demonstrates that the more an older adult leaves the house during the evening, the greater the probability of being a potential volunteer. The predicted odds of 1.565 suggests that older individuals who go out during the evening monthly to weekly are 157% more likely to be a potential volunteer than older adults who never or less than once a month go out during the evening. Second, the predicted odds ratio of 1.494 for feeling of involvement in the neighbourhood implies that older adults who feel involved to very involved in their neighbourhood are 1.5 times more likely to be a potential volunteer than older adults who are not involved to semi-involved (z(1)= 146.852, B= .402, p= .000). Results of the predicting blocks, the *individual resources* and the *socio-demographic factors*, indicate that potential volunteers are physically healthier than people who don't want to volunteer. Older individuals with a high level of education have more chance of being a potential volunteer than older individuals with a low level of education. Further, analyses indicate that the chance of being a volunteer decreases with age. Next, older individuals who are divorced are more likely to be a potential volunteer than married older people and older people in widowhood have less chance of being a potential volunteer than married older adults. The predictors 'How often do you have social contacts with

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people in your neighbourhood?', 'How satisfied are you with these social contacts?', 'Satisfaction with the neighbourhood', and 'Being never married and living together' don't contribute to the model. Overall, over the three sets, the odds ratio's of each independent variable indicate the most important predictors in order of value for being a potential volunteer: physical health condition, the level of education, getting out during the evening, the level of involvement in one's neighbourhood, being divorced, and living together.

		B	Wald	df	Exp(B)	95% C.I. EXP(B)	
						Lowe	Upper
Neighbourhood factors							
Quantity of contacts with neighbours		-,025	,591	1	,976	,916	1,039
Satisfaction with the contacts		,145	9,546	1	1,156	1,054	1,268
Feeling of involvement in the neighbourhood		,402	146,852	1	1,494*	1,400	1,594
Getting out during the evening		,448	176,97	1	1,565*	1,465	1,672
Satisfaction with neighbourhood		-,073	2,969	1	,930	,856	1,010
Individual resources							
Physical health		,760	222,13	1	2,137*	1,934	2,362
Level of education		,486	249,84	1	1,625*	1,530	1,726
Socio-demographic factors							
Age	60 – 69						
	70 – 79	-,759	490,13	1	,468*	,438	,500
	80+	-1,914	561,23	1	,148*	,126	,173
Marital status	Married		61,913	4			
	Never married	-,304	10,387	1	,738	,614	,888
	Divorced	,330	21,196	1	1,391*	1,209	1,600
	Living	-,088	,682	1	,916	,743	1,129
	Widow(er)	-,249	27,079	1	,780*	,710	,856
Constant		-3,022	885,46	1	,049		

Table 1: Binary logistic regression

*$p < 0.001$

4. CONCLUSION

The present study contributes to the advancement of social gerontology by describing that subjective neighbourhood features have an important effect on the recruitment potential for volunteering among older people. While most studies focus on the impact of socio-demographic and individual determinants of volunteering in old age, this paper points at the importance of

taking into account a broader perspective, including the influence of subjective neighbourhood features. Our findings fully support the hypothesis that the recruitment potential among older people can be explained through the social dimension of the neighbourhood when socio-demographic and individual resources are taken into account. The results demonstrate that older people, who indicate that they are willing to become a volunteer in the future, leave their home more often during the evening and feel more involved in their neighbourhood. Previous research shows that volunteering is a way for people to become integrated into their community (House et al.,1988:302). Our results however, provide support for a reverse relation: people who feel involved in the neighbourhood will more likely declare that they want to become a volunteer. It is not merely the quantity or the satisfaction with contacts with neighbours which are important, but the dynamics and social activities in the neighbourhood. These results point towards the need for voluntary organisations and policies to invest not only into the individual resources of people but also into the social life in the neighbourhood. The area of residence should be a target when developing policies and programs (Macintyre and Ellaway,1999,2003). Recruiting volunteers more effectively takes place at the local level. In taking advantage of neighbourhood involvement, more volunteers could be recruited.

As regards to future studies in this area a use of more different methods of data collection, quantitative and qualitative inquiry should be conducted. In addressing opportunities and constraints for recruiting older volunteers, it is also a clear that there is a need to further explore the impact of personal networks and the role that personal motivations play in the decision to volunteer or not. Research on volunteering too often targets individual determinants at the expense of environmental factors. Within the study a limitation occurred that the neighbourhood measures used were based on self-report data and may entail a likelihood for psychological effect (the tendency to report consistently negatively or positively) (Bowling and Stafford,2007). For example, respondents who were more optimistic may have the feeling of being more involved in their neighbourhood and may perceive their social contacts to be better.

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