Characteristics of older adult volunteers and nonvolunteers who were active in a community center’s programs were compared in order to determine correlates of voluntarism. Only two variables significantly differentiated: sex and past patterns of organizational participation. Findings suggest a high degree of consistency between past and present activity patterns of older adults. Implications related to pre-retirement planning and to the appropriate placement of the elderly in post-retirement activities.

The Older Adult Volunteer Compared to the Nonvolunteer

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The case for the provision of opportunities for older adults to perform meaningful volunteer services has been stated and defended in the social welfare literature (Lambert, Guberman, & Morris, 1953; Rosenblatt, 1966; Sainer & Zander, 1971).

Programs that utilize older volunteers enable these people to channel their needs for communication and social interaction, problem solving, and decision-making during a period when social and economic circumstances constrict life’s options and opportunities. In short, personal voids created by role losses and role changes may be filled by the task and socialization opportunities of voluntarism (Katz, 1970). In order to implement volunteer activity among elderly populations, to more selectively recruit, refer, and place them in volunteer tasks, it is necessary to determine the personal characteristics of older adult volunteers.

In reviewing the literature, it is noted that a certain amount of payment, e.g., provision for transportation and/or a meal, is built into many volunteer programs. One such program was SERVE in New York City. This program assigned volunteers to such tasks as friendly visiting of the sick, assisting mentally retarded youngsters in state institutions, clerical work in school offices and in the Red Cross, etc. In a study of SERVE (Sainer & Zander, 1971), it was shown that the volunteers were older, overwhelmingly female, and did not differ significantly from nonvolunteers in terms of formal education and socioeconomic class. In another project, compensation was provided to needy, elderly volunteers who served as Foster Grandparents to retarded youngsters 5 mornings a week. This group was similar to the nonvolunteer control group in age, sex, and education, although a significantly improved morale among the volunteers differentiated them from the control group (Gray & Kasteler, 1970).

Three other studies provide some indicators of the characteristics and attitudes of older adult volunteers. Lambert et al. (1964) studied 297 older persons as part of a broader study of
the manpower potential and kinds of opportunities available to older adult volunteers in a variety of health and welfare agencies in the Boston area. They found that age and employment status made little difference in predicting volunteer potential. Similar proportions of employed and nonemployed (30% and 40%, respectively) older adults indicated that they would be willing to volunteer in some capacity. This study concluded that opportunities were limited for older adults to do challenging and constructive work.

Rosenblatt (1966) found that potential volunteers tended to be younger than those not so inclined, a finding that contrasts with Sainer and Zander’s report. These potential volunteers were in better health and tended to enjoy life more than the nonvolunteers. There were no significant differences between the two groups with respect to marital status and education. This study suggests that people seeking paid employment would accept volunteer work if employment opportunities were not available.

In a study of 550 elderly applicants for public housing, Carp (1968) examined whether or not volunteer activity fulfilled needs similar to those fulfilled by employment. Carp concluded that, for the present at least, paid work has a much higher value attached to it than does volunteer work, not solely because of remuneration, but also because paid work denoted worthwhileness according to societal standards.

These studies indicate that, with the exception of sex, individual characteristics such as previous education, age, and marital status do not consistently differentiate between older adult volunteers and nonvolunteers. Furthermore, since two of the studies involved some form of compensation, one might hypothesize that the failure to find consistent differences is due to the fact that volunteers respond to compensation irrespective of individual characteristics. These studies do, perhaps, indicate a preference among older adults for continued paid employment which is virtually nonexistent for retirees. Society, on the other hand, continues to offer voluntarism without compensation as a meaningful mode of social involvement for retired people. There have been very few studies of the elderly who volunteer without compensation. Given the availability of more data comparing older adult volunteers and older adult nonvolunteers within the same setting, agencies could more efficiently select potential volunteers. This is the premise of this paper. For this reason, it was hypothesized that certain individual characteristics and previous life-style would distinguish the volunteers from nonvolunteers within the same leisure-time setting.

A Group Service Agency’s Volunteer Program

These data were gathered in the St. Louis Jewish Community Centers Association, an agency with an Older Adult Department of 1100 members. Five types of leisure programs, represented by approximately 40 weekly groups, are provided: social clubs; hobby groups; classes; card lounges, and volunteer service groups. The programs are planned and coordinated by seven indigenous committees and a Council that meets monthly. A low-cost transportation system is available to all.

Of 800 regular attenders, 180 participate in Volunteer Service programs. Volunteer programs consist of the following: (1) the Community Service Corps (100 members), which meets twice
weekly to sew, package, and assemble mailings for a variety of welfare organizations; (2) the Health Committee, which engages in telephone reassurance and hospital visiting; (3) Foster Grandparents, who serve the agency's Day Care Center, and (4) the Library Committee and the Gift Shop Committee. There is no compensation of any kind for the 180 members who commit themselves to these human services—they provide their own lunch and pay for their transportation each time they report to their volunteer program. The popularity of the Department's 5-part volunteer program became evident during the 1970-1971 season when, at intake, almost a third of all new members who joined the agency gave "helping others" as their principal reason for joining.

Comparing the Volunteer to the Nonvolunteer

Upon joining the Older Adult Department of the JCCA, the new members were invited to participate in a research project. One hundred and five consented to be interviewed, while 64 declined. Of this 105, 25 became regular participants in the Volunteer Service program, 25 became regular participants in other programs, 32 became irregular participants, and 23 did not participate in any way after joining the agency. The data presented herein are limited to the two groups of regular participants: the 25 volunteers and the 25 nonvolunteers.

The demographic characteristics of this sample (N=50) are the following: the majority are women (58%), married (54%), and foreign-born (54%). The average education is 8.8 years, mean income is $2700, and average age is 68.7 years.

The data analysis, based on chi-square, focused on the following variables:

1. Measures of Adjustment—Life Satisfaction and Lawton Morale scores revealed no significant differences between volunteers and nonvolunteers. As Rosenblatt (1966) found with potential volunteers, there was a nonsignificant trend for the volunteers to have higher life satisfaction and morale scores than the nonvolunteers. This is in essential agreement with Carp (1968), who stated:

Old people who participated in community service (on a regularly scheduled basis) were no happier and had no better self-concepts . . . than did people who neither worked nor performed voluntary community service.

2. Need-Structure—The need-structure of the subjects, as measured by a modified Edwards Personal Preference Schedule, failed to indicate differences between volunteers and nonvolunteers with respect to needs for succorance, nurturance, or affiliation.

3. Demographic Variables—A greater proportion of females constituted the volunteer group compared to the nonvolunteer group (88% vs. 28%). However, with the exception of sex (p<.001), the data fail to demonstrate any other significant demographic differences between the volunteers and nonvolunteers. This is in agreement with the findings of Rosenblatt (1966) and Carp (1968).

4. Past Patterns of Participation in Organizations—Participation in volunteer organizations represents a continuation of past patterns of organizational membership. Specifically, volunteers were found to differ significantly from nonvolunteers in the following: (a) A past history of greater number of organizational memberships (p<.05); (b) A past history of membership in service-oriented organizations (p<.005); (c) Higher frequency of attendance in organization meetings (p<.01); (d) A greater enjoyment derived from organizational membership (p<.05); and finally, (e) A lesser availability of free time and fewer difficulties in finding activities to fill this time (p<.005).

These differences were consonant with stated program preference upon joining the Agency's Older Adult Department. When new members were asked, "Why do you want to join the activities?" the volunteer sample emphasized their preference for service to others coupled with the desire for task accomplishment, while the nonvolunteers emphasized recreation and social preferences (p<.001).

The Significance of Pre-Retirement Participation

One might have expected that age, income, social class, birthplace and other individual variables would differentiate between volunteers and nonvolunteers. However, with the exception of sex, the data reported here have failed to distinguish any such differences, not even a difference in need-structure.

The one other area that does provide a basis for defining older adult volunteers is their past involvement in organizations and their stated program preferences when they joined the center. This cluster of findings around organizational participation and the consequent choice of program activities connotes a high degree of con-
consistency between past and present activity patterns of older adults. This seems congruent with the observation stated by Neugarten, Havighurst, and Tobin (1968):

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\ldots \text{There is considerable evidence that in normal men and women there is no sharp discontinuity of personality with age, but instead there is increasing consistency. Those characteristics that have been central to the personality seem to become more clearly delineated, and those values the individual has cherished become even more salient.}
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The data further lead us to surmise whether or not previous organizational patterns provide a basis for grouping retirees into other post-retirement activities.

The continuity of past patterns of participation in organizations is the central variable differentiating between volunteers and nonvolunteers in this study. If supported by further research, it may be stated that a person's past interest, attitudes, and activities continue through life. These factors, therefore, may be the main determinants of participation in volunteer activities in the later years of life.

For future related research, and especially to better understand retirees who were not "joiners" during their working years, the following points should be explored:

(a) the systems of rewards that the individual had responded to in the past, be they in the form of recognition, services, or monetary compensation;

(b) previous informal or casual task-experience such as sewing, typing, etc.; and

(c) past experiences in human service other than formal types of voluntarism.

We suggest, therefore, that a major consideration in older adult research and program planning be given to the congruence between the proffered activity and the older person's past activity patterns.

References


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Ah Sun-Flower

Ah Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the Sun,
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveller's journey is done:

Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow,
Arise from their graves and aspire,
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

William Blake

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