Program Evaluation of “Young at Heart”: Examining Elderly Volunteers’ Generativity

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ABSTRACT. We conducted a program evaluation study of “Young at Heart,” a Texas (United States) program that places elderly volunteers in childcare settings. The main constructs evaluated in this research-based
article are Erikson’s generativity (a motivation to guide younger generations) and life satisfaction. We compared four groups of elderly persons on these constructs: Young at Heart volunteers, Meals on Wheels volunteers (who deliver food to other elderly persons and thus gain volunteer experience, but not with children), non-volunteers drawn from the general population of one Texas community, and individuals in the same community who volunteered in a variety of activities (“miscellaneous volunteers”). Our guiding assumption was that volunteering with children would appear to be a clear expression of generativity; we thus hypothesized that YAH volunteers would score highest in it. Contrary to prediction, the miscellaneous volunteers averaged the highest generativity, followed by YAH volunteers. Philosophical and conceptual issues are identified with regard to research on generativity and intergenerational programming.

**KEYWORDS.** Intergenerational programming, program evaluation, volunteerism, childcare, generativity

Volunteerism plays an important role in the lives of many seniors with nearly four out of ten Americans aged 60 and over reporting that they volunteer (Van Willigen, 2000). This rate is somewhat lower than the percent for all adult age groups (70%). Other recent data are available from Canada’s National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating, conducted in 1996 and 1997 (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000). This survey found that 23% of Canadians 65 and older volunteered, again a somewhat lower percentage than that for other age groups. However, among individuals who volunteered, seniors contributed more hours than did any other age group.

In this paper, we present a small-scale, quasi-experimental program evaluation of “Young at Heart” (YAH). Sponsored by the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services, YAH places volunteers aged 55 and over in childcare settings in order to promote psychological growth and intergenerational understanding on the part of both the children and volunteers. Local community groups collaborate to develop a system for recruitment, training, and matching older adults with children and childcare centers. Goals of the program are to provide nurturing to young children, provide meaningful activities for older persons utilizing their skills and experience, and to increase public
awareness of needs and issues related to childcare and to older adults. Further information on YAH may be obtained on the Internet (National Child Care Information Center, undated).

We focus on Erikson’s (1963) construct of generativity, as it would appear that a well-matched YAH volunteer should exhibit a high level of this trait. McAdams, de St. Aubin, and Logan (1993, p. 221) provide a concise summary of it:

Erikson described generativity as “primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (1963, p. 267). Adults may express generativity through nurturing, teaching, leading, and promoting the next generation while generating life products and outcomes that aim to benefit the social system and promote its continuity from one generation to the next.

McAdams et al. also note specifically that volunteering is one form of expression of generativity.

In our research design, we compare four groups of seniors on their levels of generativity. Three of the groups are YAH volunteers, Meals on Wheels (MOW) volunteers (who deliver food to other elderly persons), and non-volunteer seniors (a control group). Because both YAH and MOW volunteers exhibit some degree of community nurturance, we hypothesize that these two groups would be higher in generativity than the non-volunteers. However, because YAH volunteers’ experiences also include tending to members of a younger generation (i.e., the children at the centers), we would expect YAH volunteers to have the highest generativity. In conducting random phone interviews to obtain the non-volunteers, we also identified seniors in the general population who volunteered in a variety of fields (e.g., church, library). We refer to this fourth group as the “miscellaneous volunteers,” and hypothesize that they should exhibit similar generativity to the MOW volunteers.

It is important to acknowledge that, because this is a cross-sectional study, we cannot say whether individuals self-select into volunteer participation based on their generativity, or the actual experience of volunteering promotes a sense of generativity in individuals. The important thing, however, is that if YAH volunteers as expected exhibit the highest generativity—regardless of how this came about—it will signify that there is a good match between the volunteers’ personalities and their intergenerational volunteer activity. For exploratory purposes, all participants were also assessed on life satisfaction.
METHOD

Participants and Procedures

The four groups of seniors are described below. Because the research team was based in Lubbock, Texas, a city of roughly 200,000 residents in west Texas, we attempted to gather as much data there as possible. However, the small number of YAH volunteers in Lubbock forced us to also collect data approximately 300 miles away in the Dallas, Texas, “Metroplex,” a metropolitan area of some 4 million people.

Young at Heart Volunteers. Fourteen YAH volunteers were surveyed, 11 in Dallas and 3 in Lubbock. All YAH volunteers were interviewed face-to-face at the childcare centers.

Meals on Wheels Volunteers. Fourteen MOW volunteers were surveyed, all but two from the Dallas area. A member of our research team telephoned MOW volunteers from the organization’s Dallas office to request participation in a mail survey, and those who agreed were sent a questionnaire packet. Two non-Dallas MOW volunteers were identified from a telephone survey in Lubbock (described below).

Non-Volunteer Control Group. Forty-nine non-volunteer elderly persons, randomly selected from the Lubbock phone book, were interviewed over the phone by undergraduate students, as a research methodology class project. All individuals were asked whether they were 60 or older, and whether they volunteered. Those who were old enough, but answered “No” to the latter question were included in this group. That the groups may be noncomparable in some ways due to being from different cities is acknowledged.

Miscellaneous Volunteers. In the course of the Lubbock phone-interview phase, 25 elderly persons were identified who did volunteer, in activities other than YAH or MOW. These individuals comprised the “miscellaneous volunteer” group.

All together, there were 102 participants, but most analyses had an N of 101 due to one respondent, in the non-volunteer group, having extensive missing data.

Measures

Generativity. Respondents completed the Loyola Generativity Scale (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992), a 20-item closed-ended questionnaire. Items include: “I feel as though I have made a difference to many people,” and “I have important skills that I try to teach others.” With
McAdams’s approval, we converted the original “never-very often” scale into an “agree-disagree” format. High scores indicate high generativity (α = .86).

**Life Satisfaction.** Diener’s brief (five-item) Satisfaction with Life Scale (Pavot & Diener, 1993) was used. Items include: “In most ways my life is close to my ideal,” and “I am satisfied with my life.” High scores indicate high satisfaction (α = .71).

Several other variables were measured for use in demographic description of the respondents and/or as covariates in later analyses:

- Gender
- Race/ethnicity
- Age (respondents selected the range that included their age, from 50-59, 60-64, increasing in five-year blocks to 80-84, and finally 85+)
- Marital status
- Whether they had children (yes/no)
- Amount of education (choices ranged from some elementary school to post-college graduate degree)
- Retirement status (yes/no)
- Self-rating of physical health compared to others their age (from very poor to very good)
- Whether they had grandchildren or great-grandchildren below 12 (yes/no)
- Amount of interaction with children below 12 (“talk with, play with, visit . . . ”; choices from never to daily)

## RESULTS

### Demographics

The four volunteer/non-volunteer groups were relatively comparable demographically. All groups, for the most part, contained individuals ranging from their 60s through their upper 70s or 80s. However, a group-by-age-range chi-square was significant, $\chi^2 (18 \text{ df, } N = 101) = 45.8, p < .001$, indicating some differences between groups. All groups were completely or almost completely comprised of white individuals, except the YAH volunteers (6 white, 7 black, 1 Hispanic). A chi-square test of group differences in racial/ethnic composition was significant ($\chi^2 [9 \text{ df, } N = 102] = 44.4, p < .001$).
Group Comparisons on Generativity and Life Satisfaction

As shown in Table 1, the four volunteer/non-volunteer groups differed in their levels of generativity, based both on a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for unadjusted means ($F[3, 97] = 5.94, p = .001$) and an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) for adjusted means ($F[3, 83] = 5.97, p = .001$). In neither analysis did the groups differ on life satisfaction ($p$ values of .227 and .399).

Although the Young at Heart volunteers had a relatively high mean level of generativity, conservative Scheffe post hoc contrasts on the unadjusted means found the only significant differences ($p < .05$) to be between the miscellaneous volunteers (who had the highest generativity), on the one hand, and the “Meals” and the non-volunteer groups (who were the two lowest groups on generativity), on the other. Generativity was related positively to two of the covariates, amount of education and more frequent interaction with children. Also, the ANCOVA yielded a relationship suggestive of a trend ($p = .075$), indicating that people with young grandchildren or great-grandchildren had higher generativity than their counterparts without them.

**DISCUSSION**

The examination of generativity as a construct expressed through the volunteer behavior of older adults raises several important conceptual and philosophical issues. An important issue concerns the many unexplored aspects of generativity, particularly its conceptualization and expression. If generativity is expressed through a wide variety of life pursuits and in the context of diverse settings (religious, political, artistic, literary, civic, familial), as Erikson (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1994).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Generativity</th>
<th>Life Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young at Heart</td>
<td>64.28 (64.71)</td>
<td>25.29 (25.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meals on Wheels</td>
<td>58.53 (56.46)</td>
<td>27.64 (27.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Volunteers</td>
<td>62.17 (63.45)</td>
<td>27.19 (27.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous Volunteers</td>
<td>68.45 (66.54)</td>
<td>28.31 (27.40)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Raw means are outside of parentheses, covariate-adjusted means inside. Covariates included: gender, age, children, education, health, grandchildren, and amount of interaction with children.
1992) contended, there may not be solid theoretical reasons to expect older volunteers who work with young children to have the highest generative strivings in comparison to other age peers as our initial hypothesis proposed. McAdams and de St. Aubin defined generativity as a configuration of seven psychosocial characteristics or factors that are focused on individual and societal goals of providing for the next generation. McAdams et al. (1993) state, “Adults are generative in different ways, sometimes through their beliefs and concerns, sometimes through their commitments and actions, and so forth” (p. 1013). Actions reflective of generativity include such diverse behaviors as creating something that will remain after one is deceased (painting, quilt, book), leaving a personal legacy, preserving traditions, caring for the environment, and passing something to the next generation. Likewise, parenting, mentoring, and care of the young are additional examples of the many forms of generative behavior. Contrary to the prediction of this study, Young at Heart volunteers—while relatively high in generativity—did not stand out in this regard, with miscellaneous volunteers scoring even higher. It is possible that many of the miscellaneous volunteers also worked with children and may have been involved in a number of generative activities. Given the many limitations of the present study (e.g., small sample size, groups recruited from different cities, cross-sectional design), any conclusions should be made with caution until larger, more definitive studies can answer these questions in the future.

Another issue to consider is whether or not volunteering in child care settings has the same underlying motivations for all volunteers. Clary et al. (1998) take a functionalist approach to the study of motivations of volunteers by suggesting that volunteering may serve a wide range of personal and social motivations. They identified six functions potentially served by volunteerism (values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement), several, but not all, of which reflect generative strivings. The YAH volunteers’ comments from oral interviews documented that their motivations for participating in YAH were primarily of a generative nature. Future studies should ask volunteers what functions and meanings their volunteering represents for them.

A noteworthy finding from this study was the relatively high level of generativity for all groups, volunteers and non-volunteers; a finding consistent with the idea that generativity is a part of identity development throughout the adult years. McAdams and de St. Albin (1992) argue that the cultural demand for generativity is greatest in mid-adulthood, yet as long as the culture provides avenues and normative support for generative acts, older individuals will continue to express their “need
to be needed,” or personal legacy. The high generativity of the respondents may reflect their efforts to maintain continuity in definitions of the self or to create new expressions of identity in late life. Future research is needed to examine the ways in which generativity is used to maintain continuity or as a conduit for a changing sense of self in relationship to the larger environment. We should mention also that other factors such as availability of programs in one’s area, transportation, and safety may influence volunteerism or other forms that generativity may take, especially so for an older population.

Another issue that arises in late life is whether or not the movement toward ego integrity, Erikson’s last task of adult development, brings a reduction in generative behaviors. Declining energy and frailty may require that older adults curtail generative efforts and redirect their energies towards the inner work of life’s meaning and ego transcendence. Evidence from our study indicates that older volunteers continue to give priority to generative behaviors. Likewise, Vaillant’s (2002) study of aging based on the Harvard Study of Adult Development, identified generativity as a key to successful aging. Vaillant, however, notes that decreased physical stamina with advanced age may lead to less focus on generativity. Theoretical and empirical literature suggest that generativity reaches its peak in midlife and continues well into later life; however, studies are needed that follow persons over time to completely answer this question.

One clear avenue for future research is to conduct longitudinal studies of volunteers, starting as they begin their work with an organization. This could tell us whether volunteers who were high in generativity and placed in a setting that involved guiding or nurturing younger generations tended to remain in their volunteer positions longer (and with greater satisfaction) than less well-matched volunteers (i.e., high-generativity volunteers in a low-generativity setting, or vice-versa). If such future research showed generativity to be important for volunteer retention and satisfaction, then administrators of volunteer programs could use psychological questionnaires such as the generativity measure from the present study to screen volunteers and use this information in placement decisions.

In conclusion, we would encourage researchers and program administrators to consider following the more general framework we have implemented, namely incorporating scientific theories (such as Erikson’s life span theory) into studies of actual organizations. Going back and forth between the perspectives of academia and the “real world,” which is a well-established approach to doing research (Bickman, 1980), can
be mutually beneficial. Academic theories can provide a focus for what kinds of traits and behaviors to look for in conducting an evaluation. Further, results from field studies can then be used to refine or modify the theories.

REFERENCES


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