We used findings from the Minnesota Senior Study to examine the theoretical and methodological difficulties of defining, coding, and analyzing data on older volunteers. This study, the first statewide survey of the needs and resources of the elderly in Minnesota in almost 20 years, found that over half (52%) of older Minnesotans do volunteer work for organizations — considerably higher than has been found in national surveys. Problems in definition and methodology, however, have confounded analyses. This paper proposes a new conceptual model for classifying volunteer roles, based on three dimensions: whether the voluntary service is "formal" or "informal"; whether the activity entails a regular or an occasional time commitment; and the nature of the service activity (person-to-community, person-to-object, or person-to-person).

Key Words: Volunteers, Productive aging, Voluntary service, Statewide elderly survey

Older Volunteers: A Discussion of the Minnesota Senior Study

Lucy Rose Fischer, PhD; Daniel P. Mueller, PhD; and Philip W. Cooper, MA

As a result of little systematic research done on volunteer work, much less information is available on unpaid work than on paid work, for either young or old people. In fact, volunteer work is not easy to define. Like paid work, volunteer work subsumes a very large number of specific jobs. Unlike paid labor, however, no standard classification system exists for defining and categorizing voluntary labor; that is, there is no system for classifying volunteer work as was developed by Hauser and Featherman (1977) for occupational stratification. Thus, a volunteer might be the president or chair of a charitable foundation or an usher for a church function or someone who stuffs envelopes for a political campaign or someone who delivers home-delivered meals or a visitor at a hospital.

With people living longer and retiring at younger ages, large numbers of people are in their postretirement years. Researchers and policy planners describe a "vast reservoir of active, healthy, experienced, and educated retired persons" whose productivity might "be more effectively tapped, on an unpaid basis" (Committee on an Aging Society, 1986, p. 5). How much volunteer work is done by the "vast reservoir" of retirees? What predicts whether or not older people volunteer? What kinds of work are done by older volunteers? In this paper, we address these questions, using findings from the Minnesota Senior Study. Using this study as an example, we also discuss the methodological difficulties of defining, coding, and analyzing data on older volunteers. In the final section of the paper, we present a new conceptual model for defining and categorizing forms of voluntary service.

Background

What is Volunteer Work?

One of the problems in definition is that volunteering might include a narrow or broad range of activities. Should volunteer work only include activities done for organizations? Or, should helping a neighbor (e.g., bringing food or offering transportation) also be considered voluntary service? Is babysitting a grandchild volunteer work? Both broad and narrow definitions are problematic, though in different ways. On the one hand, if we use a broad definition, it is difficult to draw limits. How do we distinguish between just socializing with a friend and providing volunteer-type help? On the other hand, if we use a narrow definition — for example, unpaid work for charitable organizations — we are clearly leaving out a wide range of unpaid services that people do for others. Logically, this is also problematic. If a volunteer for a church, for example, provides transportation services to a neighbor under the aegis of a church, why should the same type of service (giving a ride to a neighbor) not be counted as volunteering if this service is provided on an informal basis? (See Chambre, 1984; Kieffer, 1986; Morgan, 1986.)

There are also problems of definition with regard to motivation and compensation. Should volunteered...
ing only be defined as work for which the reward is altruistic? Can volunteers be compensated in any way — and still be considered volunteers? If people provide services for which they are reimbursed not in money but through an exchange of services, is this volunteering? (See Cahn, 1988; Hodgkinson & Schneiders, 1989.)

Because no standard definition exists, in the Minnesota Senior Study (discussed below), we opted for a broad rather than a narrow definition of volunteer work, so that we could examine the contributions of older Minnesotans as fully as possible. However, we also decided to ask separate questions on “formal” and “informal” volunteering — that is, volunteer work for organizations versus voluntary services to individuals.

How Many Americans Volunteer?

Given the inconsistency in definitions of volunteering, the wide variability in estimates of how many Americans do volunteer work is unsurprising. Even surveys conducted in the same year report different numbers of volunteers. Estimates of the numbers of volunteers range from 16% to 55% for ages 18–64, and from 9% to 37% for ages 65 and older. The highest estimates of volunteering come from the Gallup surveys, which define volunteer work as doing “work in some way to help others for no monetary pay” and include informal help to friends, as well as volunteer work for organizations (see Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1988, which is based on analysis of Gallup volunteer data). Most other studies use a much more restricted definition (Worthy & Ventura-Merkel, 1982).

Findings from previous studies report an increase in volunteering and suggest that much of the growth in volunteering has come from increased participation by men (Morgan, 1986). Using a narrow definition of volunteer work, Romero (1986) reports that the percentage of women volunteering increased from 21% in the mid 1960s to 28% in the mid 1980s, whereas men’s rate of volunteering increased from 15% to 30% during the same time period.

A recent Gallup survey found a considerably higher rate of volunteering in the Midwest (including Minnesota) than in other regions of the United States. This survey on giving and volunteering showed that 57% of Midwesterners do volunteer work, compared with 46% in the West, 41% in the East, and 39% in the South (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1988).

Studies have shown that a large portion of volunteering actually is done by a very small proportion of the community. Morgan (1986, p. 76) cautions that “even among these groups [that volunteer] a few gave substantial amounts while many gave little or none, making the aggregate estimates shaky.”

Older Americans as Volunteers

Various surveys have shown that, with age, a decreasing amount of volunteering occurs and that the elderly volunteer at the lowest rate of all adults (Herzog et al., 1989; Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1988; Lackner & Koeck, 1980). As Hamilton, Frederick, & Schneiders (1988, p. 5) point out, however, although the elderly are somewhat less likely to volunteer, “as a group retirees are older, poorer and less well-educated — all factors that are related to lower rates of volunteering.”

It is difficult to make easy comparisons between the elderly and other age groups, not only because of varying definitions of volunteer work, but also because studies vary widely in how they operationally define older adults. For example, Hamilton, Frederick, and Schneiders (1988) have data on older Americans defined as 45+; other studies use 55+, 60+, or 65+. The findings are markedly different. Hamilton, Frederick, and Schneiders (1988) report that 39% of older Americans (i.e., 45+) volunteer; other studies, based on a narrow definition of volunteering and using data on adults age 60+ or 65+, find that 9–22% volunteer (Chambre, 1984; Herzog et al., 1989). If help to families (adult children, grandchildren, and other relatives) were included as volunteer work, many more elderly would be defined as volunteers, because it appears that more than two-thirds of elderly persons provide services to their families, such as babysitting grandchildren and caring for ill family members (see Herzog et al., 1989).

In an assessment of the amount of volunteering, the issue is not only how many volunteer but how much time is spent by those who do volunteer. Various studies have shown that most elderly volunteers do not spend large amounts of time in their volunteer work. One study, for example, found that only 5% of older adult volunteers “worked” more than 6 hours a week (Worthy & Ventura-Merkel, 1982).

A major rationale for recruiting older volunteers is that retirees ought to have more time to do volunteer work than people in the paid labor force. We might expect, then, that older retirees would be more likely to volunteer than older adults who are still employed. In fact, the reverse is true (Morgan, 1986). The elderly who remain in the labor force are more likely to volunteer than retired elderly. Even so, among older volunteers, those who are retired spend somewhat more time in volunteering than those still in the labor force (Chambre, 1984). Furthermore, when making comparisons between retirees and older labor force participants, keep in mind the substantial age and health differences between these groups. Older labor force participants, on average, are considerably younger than retirees and are much less likely to have health and functional problems (Fischer et al., 1989).

A number of significant barriers to volunteering by older people exist. For example, older potential volunteers are more likely than younger adults to suffer from poor health, to have functional disabilities, to lack transportation, or to have low incomes (Lackner & Koeck, 1980). Even if rates of volunteering decline with age, however, substantial numbers of elderly, even among the old-old (75+) and the oldest-old (85+), still continue to volunteer. Worthy and Ventura-Merkel (1982), in their review of surveys on...
volunteering, noted that about an eighth of Americans over age 80 are volunteers.

Who Volunteers?

In addition to age, several other variables are associated with volunteering. Undoubtedly, the most significant is social class. People with higher incomes and more education are more likely to volunteer. Moreover, among volunteers, the more affluent and the better educated are the most active and give the most time (Chambre, 1984; Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1988; Kieffer, 1986; Romero, 1986). Morgan (1986, p. 76) noted:

We also know from an earlier study asking about all volunteer work — for organizations or relatives — that income dominated the explanations, so much so that, surprisingly, the single best predictor was the number of modern appliances in the home.

Among the elderly, income and education also affect the amount of volunteering (Lemke & Moos, 1989). The proportion of well-educated, high-income people in a particular population is likely to have an effect on the potential number of volunteers. More recent cohorts of elderly are more educated and have higher incomes, so there ought to be increasing percentages of older volunteers.

Two other factors that appear to have some influence on volunteering are marital status and gender. There is fairly good evidence that married people are more likely to be volunteers than unmarried people (Chambre, 1984; Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1988). Exactly why this is so is unclear. It may be that married people have less difficulty managing their day-to-day lives and therefore have more time for volunteering. It is also possible that spouses facilitate or encourage volunteer types of activities — for example, by providing transportation or doing an activity with a spouse — and that married people sustain ties with larger networks, giving more opportunities to provide voluntary services. Married people also tend to have more income than unmarried people, and the gap in income level may be enough to explain the difference in volunteering by marital status.

The effect of gender on volunteering is less clear; evidence from various studies is mixed. Some studies report that women volunteer more. For example, Chambre (1984) asserted that women are more likely to volunteer at all stages of the life cycle. Herzog et al. (1989), on the other hand, found no gender difference in the likelihood of volunteering, although women spend somewhat more hours volunteering than men. As noted, other studies suggest that women are no longer more likely to volunteer than men (Romero, 1986; Morgan, 1986). Harris and Associates (1981) reported that, among the elderly, the greatest increase in numbers of volunteers was from men. Some evidence suggests that men and women do somewhat different types of volunteer work. It appears that men are more likely to volunteer for recreational and work-related activities, whereas women volunteer for more health- and education-related activities (Romero, 1986).

Church Work

A very large proportion of volunteering and charitable giving in the United States is through religious organizations. Almost all churches and synagogues use volunteers for work in their congregations and associated activities. Moreover, churches sponsor or encourage other forms of charity and volunteering, especially in social welfare and education. It should not be surprising, then, that church members are considerably more likely to give to charity and to volunteer than nonmembers. Among the elderly (65+), according to the most recent Gallup survey, 38% of elderly people who are members of a church or other religious organization are volunteers, compared with 26% of nonmembers. Furthermore, among church members, those who are the most active — that is, those who attend services at least once a week — are the most likely to volunteer their time (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1989; see also Hamilton, Frederick, & Schneiders, 1988).

Why is it that churches are so important in fostering volunteer work? One reason may be that volunteer work is simply a part of everyday church work. Moreover, religious values also tend to foster a sense of community cohesion and responsibility for others in the community. This may be why church members are more likely to volunteer in general, not just for church-sponsored activities (see Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1989).

It is also possible that churches offer an indirect impetus to volunteer work by providing a focal organization and network of potential volunteers. In the 1960s, churches, especially black churches in the South, were the organizational linchpin of the Civil Rights Movement. Leadership for the Civil Rights Movement came from the churches; mass meetings happened in the churches; spiritual guidance came through the religious teachings of the churches; and legitimacy for the movement was enhanced by the authority of the churches. In a similar way, religious establishments may be the organizational focal points of volunteering activities. This may be particularly true for the elderly population, which tends to have high rates of church membership.

Religious organizations are in a particularly advantageous position to locate and recruit older volunteers: they can provide potential volunteers with a spiritual rationale for providing their services; they can offer recognition within their congregational community; and churches and synagogues also can help to develop a lay leadership among older volunteers. For all these reasons, “church work” has important implications for volunteering that go well beyond services provided to or through individual churches or particular religious organizations.

The Volunteer Potential

According to Hodgkinson and Weitzman (1988, p. 4), the untapped opportunity for increasing the amount of volunteering is sizable:

There is an enormous capacity to increase giving and
volunteering in the United States... Of the three-fourths of respondents who believed that they should volunteer to help others, 50 percent did not volunteer in the past year.

Others are not quite so sure about untapped potential. Kieffer (1986), for example, noted that there are supposedly 6.5 million Americans who are 55 and over and who are interested in volunteering, but he cautions that it is not at all clear that one could actually get them to do this work. Kieffer's point is important: the fact that a survey respondent says that he or she is willing to volunteer or that he or she (or people, in general) should volunteer is very different from actually participating as a volunteer.

The truth is that there is little understanding of why people volunteer. When respondents in surveys are asked about their motivations for volunteering, they tend to give multiple responses. Perhaps this suggests that multiple motivations are involved and that “doing good” (altruism) is just one of a complex set of reasons for volunteering. Of course, if the motivations are complex, this means that motivating volunteers and potential volunteers is not likely to be an easy process. In a review of the “economics of voluntarism,” Romero (1986) raises a number of issues for which it appears there are as yet no clear answers. She notes, for example, that it is not clear if people are motivated to volunteer in general or by particular jobs. Romero also points to research evidence suggesting that people need to be compensated personally for volunteering, but then she comments that we need further studies to show how to best provide compensation.

Some special issues emerge for older people who volunteer. One difference between younger and older volunteers is that older volunteers are more likely to see volunteering as filling a need for activity. In surveys, elderly volunteers are more likely to say that they volunteer “to keep me active”; they are also more likely to refer to “having time now” for volunteering (Hamilton, Frederick, & Schneider, 1988; Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1988).

Why do some elderly volunteer and not others? Perhaps volunteer types exist — that is, people who can be counted on to provide all sorts of services, whenever volunteers are needed. Older volunteers tend to be people who volunteered when they were younger (Committee on Aging, 1986). Moreover, those who volunteer for one activity tend to volunteer for other activities (Lemke & Moos, 1989). It also appears, however, that age, which is associated with incremental health deficits, affects volunteering. The elderly are more likely to give poor health as a reason for not volunteering, or for not giving many hours (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1988). They are also more likely to say that lack of transportation is a reason for not volunteering (Kieffer, 1986). There is also another factor: one major reason that many older people give for not volunteering is that no one asked them. The policy implications of this ought to be clear (Committee on Aging, 1986; Kieffer, 1986).

Ethical and Other Thorny Issues

It would be hard to argue that altruism is bad or that a society should discourage its members from voluntarily helping others in the community. Even so, three interrelated dilemmas concerning volunteer work must be addressed.

First is the potential for exploitation of volunteers (Cahn, 1988; Lackner & Koeck, 1980). Under what circumstances is not paying people for their labor justifiable? Traditionally, more voluntary labor has been done by women. In effect, women have done unpaid work, in large part, because of their limited opportunities to do paid work. This is a comparable issue with regard to encouraging the voluntary labor of older citizens. To the extent that the elderly are encouraged to leave the paid labor force, especially to the degree that older workers confront implicit age discrimination in the work place, any movement to compel or urge elderly to give volunteer service would be exploitive.

The second dilemma which is the flip side of the first: How does the use of volunteers affect professional and other paid workers? Professional staff often are wary of volunteers both because of possible problems of reliability with volunteer workers and also because they see nonexperts taking over some of their specialized activities (Kieffer, 1986; Romero, 1986). Because they are unpaid, there is no way to ensure that volunteers arrive when they are supposed to, that they are available when needed, or that they don’t quit after having received expensive training. Labor unions are often suspicious of volunteer programs, and with good reason. In a time of recession, workers might very well view volunteers as potentially taking away their much-needed jobs (Kieffer, 1986).

The third dilemma — really a whole set of issues and questions — relates to the implications of volunteering for governmental programs. Should volunteer work substitute for already existing entitlements or only for expanding the numbers and types of services? How should the government support volunteer programs? Under what circumstances is a volunteer program deemed to be more or less expensive than a program that relies exclusively on paid staff? One of the outcomes of encouraging volunteering is that there may actually be a decrease in public services if federal, state, or local governments try to replace established entitlements with voluntary service programs (Cahn, 1988).

Findings on Older Volunteers from the Minnesota Senior Study

The Minnesota Senior Study, conducted in 1988–1989, is the first statewide survey of the needs and resources of elderly people in Minnesota in almost 20 years. The study, conducted by Wilder Research Center of the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, entailed a telephone survey with a representative statewide sample of about 1,500 noninstitutionalized Minnesotans age 60 and older. A decision was made early...
in the design of the study to gather data on how the elderly contribute to their society, in addition to assessing their needs.

In some ways, the most intriguing findings from the study came from the questions on volunteers. Our findings suggested that older Minnesotans might be surprisingly active in volunteer work. Whereas other surveys seemed to show that most elderly Americans do not volunteer, our data indicated that most older Minnesotans do at least some volunteer work. In fact, in reports published by the Wilder Foundation (see Fischer et al., 1989, 1990; Wilder Research Center, 1989), we estimated that older Minnesotans contribute approximately 70 million hours a year in voluntary services, based on a projection to the population of 670,000 noninstitutionalized Minnesotans age 60+. These research findings bear the political message that the contributions of the elderly are as important as their service needs and that older people are an important resource in Minnesota.

At the same time, we were aware of methodological problems with the questions on volunteer work. The coding and analyses of these data were the thorniest task in the completion of the Minnesota Senior Study. The design of the volunteer questions was confounded by the scarcity of previous research on volunteering or older volunteers, the lack of standardized definitions, and the complexity of the phenomenon. Although we reported surprisingly high levels of volunteering, we were reluctant to conclude that older Minnesotans volunteer “more” than elderly people in other states, because of problems in the design and coding of our volunteer questions and the lack of adequate comparative data.

The Design of the Minnesota Senior Study

Considerable attention was given to ensuring the representativeness of the sample for the Minnesota Senior Study. The sample was selected by using probability sampling techniques, with stratification by region, to represent noninstitutionalized persons age 60 or older living in all regions throughout Minnesota. Eligible respondents were selected through random digit dialing to Minnesota telephone exchanges. When more than one respondent age 60 or older resided in the household, the eligible respondent was randomly selected by using the most recent birthday method of respondent selection (Salmon & Nichols, 1983).

The questionnaire was pretested and underwent many revisions, and the interviewers were extensively trained and supervised. Telephone numbers were called 10 times if there was no answer before a number was excluded. Potential respondents who initially refused to participate were all called again and given another chance to be part of the sample. Special arrangements were made to gather information on respondents who might have difficulty with telephone interviews (e.g., informants were used when respondents were too impaired to answer questions themselves, and translators were made available for those not fluent in English). When specific answers were unclear, respondents were called back so that the data would be as reliable as possible.

A weighting procedure was used to correct for bias in the sample. Because only one person age 60 or older was interviewed in each household, persons who live alone or who are the only person 60 or older in their households are overrepresented in the sample. To adjust for this overrepresentation, responses were weighted by the number of persons 60 years old or older in the home. The weighted sample, 2,214, is equal to the number of persons 60 and older living in the 1,500 households. Tests of statistical significance, however, were based on unweighted data. From the total of eligible cases, the response rate was 68%. A comparison of our sample with Census data and 1990 population estimates suggests that the study sample is an adequate representation of noninstitutionalized Minnesota seniors 60 years and older in households with telephones. Although females are slightly overrepresented in the sample, the sample is similar in the distribution of age groups.

To assess the needs and resources of older persons, the questionnaire covered a broad range of topics. These included: demographic characteristics (e.g., age, income, education), housing, transportation, health and daily functioning, social supports, employment, and participation in volunteer work. Questions also were asked on both paid work and a variety of unpaid types of “work”: caregiving to spouses, parents and others who are ill; care for grandchildren; other types of help to adult children; help to neighbors or others in the community; and volunteer work for organizations.

Questions on Volunteering

Three indicators of volunteer activities, including a series of open-ended responses, were analyzed: (1) “Sometimes people help others by doing things such as driving them to appointments, church, shopping, or doctors; bringing them meals or groceries; helping with house or yard work; and so on. In the past 12 months, have you provided any of this kind of help?” (If yes), “What kinds of help? What else?”; (2) “People also help organizations, such as churches, libraries, hospitals, neighborhood groups, service clubs, or political parties. They help in many ways as members or office holders. In the past 12 months, have you provided help to organizations in your neighborhood or community?” (If yes), “What kinds of help have you given? What else?”; (3) “Thinking of the help you give both to other people and organizations — on average about how many hours do you spend doing these activities in your community each month?” Respondents were not counted as being volunteers if they indicated that they spent 0 hours doing these activities or if they listed no specific services, other than being a member or donating money or goods.

In addition, questions on help to families were asked in an earlier section of the questionnaire (on social ties) and included information on caregiving and help to adult children. Respondents were asked
two sets of questions: "Are you currently providing care for one or more persons because of their injury, disability, long-term illness, or inability to care for themselves?" and "In the past 3 months, have you helped your children in any of the following ways? Helped care for grandchildren? Helped out when someone was ill? Did things around their house such as home repairs, gardening or other projects? Did housekeeping housework, mending, sewing, cooking, or laundry? Provided housing? Provided transportation?"

The data on family help was included with data presented on voluntary services in order to provide a full picture of unpaid work. Some overlap may exist between the responses to questions about help to families and the question on voluntary "services to individuals" in that some respondents may have referred to helping families when describing what they do for "individuals." The risk, however, was that if we had left out items on "help to families" as a separate category, we would have missed a substantial number of services performed by the elderly.

Caveats

Despite efforts to ensure the quality of the data, the Minnesota Senior Study has a number of limitations. With "older Minnesotans" defined as 60 and over, the sample tends to be weighted toward the elderly. That the most frail and the most needy older Minnesotans have a relatively high rate of institutionalization for the elderly, the exclusion of the institutionalized elderly means that the most frail and the most needy are systematically left out of the sample. The reliance on telephone interviews is another potential problem. This survey misses the homeless and the 3% of elderly in Minnesota who have no telephones (Minnesota Analysis and Planning System, 1983), and it also undercounts those elderly who live in boarding houses or inner-city hotels with only one phone per building or per hallway.

Also, the nature of a "needs and resources" survey means that a broad range of questions is included, whereas the coverage of each topic is quite limited. Furthermore, as we began the analysis, it became clear that the wording of certain questions and the coding of both closed-ended and open-ended responses were particularly problematic. As noted, some of the most problematic data were associated with the questions on volunteering. We discuss these problems below.

The Number of Older Volunteers in Minnesota

One of the surprising findings from this survey is that older Minnesotans appear to do considerably more volunteer work than would be expected from national surveys. Our findings on frequency of volunteering include data on both "formal" volunteer work for organizations and "informal" services for relatives, friends, neighbors, and other individuals. This broad definition allows a more comprehensive examination of voluntary services than would be possible if "informal" services were excluded from the analyses.

Table 1 shows three categories of volunteering: volunteer work for organizations, voluntary services to individuals, help to families. Given the ambiguity in defining volunteer work, it seemed sensible to examine separately each of these types of volunteering. Specifically, family work may be considered more obligatory than altruistic. Table 1 indicates that most older Minnesotans do some form of voluntary service: over half do volunteer work for organizations (which would fit the narrowest definition of "volunteering"); about two-fifths provide services to individuals; and about three-fifths provide services to their families (including babysitting grandchildren or providing other services to adult children). When all of these activities are added together, only about 17% of older Minnesotans do none of these types of volunteering. The implication is that older Minnesotans are a significant resource. They volunteer for organizations, provide services to their neighbors and other individuals, and help their families. Even using the most restricted definition of volunteering — volunteer work for organizations — it appears that most elderly (52%) are volunteers.

In assessing these data on the number of older volunteers, we are faced with two puzzlements: Why do so many older Minnesotans seem to volunteer for organizations? Conversely, why are there comparatively fewer who help other individuals? The answers to both of these questions are elusive.

The first question may have either methodological or substantive explanations — that is, our questions somehow inflated the frequencies or there actually is an exceptional amount of volunteering in the population sampled. As noted, not only are there no standardized questions on volunteering, but also the age groupings vary (from 45 + to 65 +). For example, the Gallup Survey asked about "working in some way to help others for no monetary pay," including both formal and informal volunteer activities, and reported that 37% of respondents age 65 + were volunteers (Gallup Organization, 1981). (In the Minnesota sample, 50% of those 65 + volunteer for organizations.) It is not immediately obvious why the Minnesota Senior Study question (on volunteer work for organizations) would elicit more positive responses, especially because we included respondents as volunteers only if they specified both volunteer activities and number of hours contributed. In fact, there are several reasons to suggest that our survey ought to have deflated the number of volunteers counted (compared, for example, with the Gallup survey). First, because ours was a telephone survey without visual prompts (unlike the Gallup Survey we could not use cards with lists of volunteer-type activities), we might have missed activities that respondents failed to recall. Second, the Gallup survey, in particular, subsumes both informal and formal volunteering in their reported rate of volunteering. Finally, our data were collected largely during the summer, when we might suspect that people are focused on other forms of leisure activities.
The substantive explanation is just speculative. Potentially, Minnesota, with its homogeneous population and its high levels of church membership, is more successful at recruiting older volunteers than other states. Possibly, also, there have been increasing numbers of older volunteers with each generation of older adults — so that the more recent the survey, the higher the percentage of volunteers. However, we do not have sufficient data to draw inferences about either region or cohort.

The second question is in some ways more troubling: Why do relatively few respondents claim to provide services to other individuals? We found that more people do volunteer work for organizations than provide informal services to individuals. Intuitively, the reverse should be true, because help to other individuals ought to cover a broader domain. Anyone who takes in mail for a vacationing neighbor or provides any small service for a neighbor or friend ought to respond affirmatively to this question. Do we assume that approximately three-fifths of older adults — so that the more recent the survey, the higher the percentage of volunteers. However, we do not have sufficient data to draw inferences about either region or cohort.

Volunteer Hours Contributed by Older Minnesotans

As in other studies, our data suggest that most older volunteers do not commit very large amounts of time. The mean amount of time spent in volunteering is 14 hours per month. Among those who volunteer, 28% spend 15 hours or more a month volunteering. Any paid job, including a part-time job, would be likely to involve far greater time demands. Of those who volunteer, half spend 7 hours a month or less — which is equivalent to less than 2 hours per week. If we count only those who contribute at least 40 hours a month — or the equivalent of a quarter-time job (i.e., 10 hours per week) — we find that less than 8% of older volunteers make that large of a commitment.

Our data are particularly weak in measuring the amount of time spent on volunteering. The question required respondents to give an average monthly estimate of time spent both in helping individuals and volunteering for organizations. On what basis did respondents make their estimates? It might be relatively easy to account for a regular, weekly activity. But how would a respondent count an activity that he or she did once during the year? Both combining all activities in one time measure and asking for an average per month are problematic. Without specific, codable categories, we cannot even estimate the level of error in responses to the question on contributed time.

The Work That Older Volunteers Do

Volunteering can mean hundreds of different jobs, from cutting grass for a church to chairing a committee to baking cakes for a community event to visiting patients in a hospital. To get a general overview of this array of jobs, we have grouped the types of jobs into subcategories. Table 1 lists seven types of volunteer work for organizations, six specific types of services to individuals, and three types of help to families. Because a respondent could list multiple types of volunteer work, the percentages add up to more than the total of respondents who do volunteer work for organizations, provide voluntary services to individuals, and help their families (52%, 42%, and 59%, respectively). The categories of volunteer work for organizations include both types of organizations and types of activities, so that the categories are not always mutually exclusive. These categories were created, on the basis of face validity, after the data were collected and after most of the coding was completed, in an attempt to make sense out of a very large number of responses. As discussed below, although this categorization provides one framework for organizing volunteer data, further theory development is needed for elaborating an adequate approach to volunteer activities.

Table 1, which shows the percentages of respon-
dents who do each type of volunteer activity, suggests that the types of jobs done for organizations versus individuals are generally quite different. The most frequent type of help to organizations is church work. The most frequent type of help to individuals is providing transportation: 28% of the sample provide this help, or two-thirds of those who give help to individuals. In fact, the large numbers of elderly who help others with transportation may help to explain why only 6% of the elderly in our sample said that they lack transportation (Fischer et al., 1989). Furthermore, the differences between help to individuals and volunteer work for organizations might indicate that informal services fill in the gaps left by formal helping organizations, and vice versa.

A Profile of Volunteers

Other studies have found that income and education are associated with volunteering. The findings of the Minnesota Senior Study are similar. Table 2 indicates relationships between demographic and social variables and the three major types of volunteering (for organizations, for individuals, and for families). We will also discuss how sociodemographic variables are related to both the specific forms of volunteer activities (as listed in Table 1) and the amount of time spent volunteering, although these details are not shown in Table 2.

According to our data, not only are those with higher incomes more likely to volunteer for organizations in general, but they are also more likely to do volunteer work for two types of organizations in particular: social welfare and citizenship-type organizations. However, income level is not significantly related to other types of voluntary services: help to families, voluntary services to individuals, or church work. These differential effects of income level on types of volunteering suggest that lower income respondents are not averse to helping. Rather, there may be network and access issues — that is, potential volunteers with lower incomes may be outside the universe of certain voluntary organizations and, therefore, are never asked to help.

Education appears to have a more universal impact on volunteering. For all three major categories of helping, those with the least education are the least likely to help. The strongest and clearest impact of education is on volunteer work for organizations (see Table 2). In addition, for a number of specific types of volunteer work for organizations — church work, leadership activities, and participation in social welfare, health and citizenship organizations — those with the highest levels of education are the most likely to volunteer; those with the least education are the least likely to volunteer. Education also affects how much time volunteers contribute: college-educated volunteers tend to contribute more hours per month than less educated volunteers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Volunteer work for organizations</th>
<th>Voluntary services for individuals</th>
<th>Help to families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under $5,000</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$5,000-$9,999</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000-$14,999</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000 or more</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college or more</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonmarried</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not working</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No functional problems</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With functional problems</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-74</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-84</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85+</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twin Cities metro area</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Minnesota</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to drive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driver or spouse of driver</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondriver</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Profile of Volunteers: Older Minnesotans (60 + Years Old) Who Help Their Families, Provide Voluntary Services to Individuals, and Do Volunteer Work for Organizations

Note. The chi-square statistic was used to test for a relationship between volunteering and a series of variables. These tests were carried out for each of the three types of volunteering. Only those percentages are reported where results of the test indicated a relationship (i.e., p < .01).

...ried elderly to do at least some forms of volunteer work (see Table 2) — that is, they are more likely to help their families, they do more volunteer work for organizations overall, and they are more likely to participate in both church work and citizenship-types of volunteer organizations. Possibly, married elders have wider social networks, both in family ties and in affiliations with church congregations and other community organizations. Moreover, nonmarried elders tend to be older and have lower incomes. Marital status, however, is not significantly related to voluntary services for individuals — in that married and nonmarried people are about equally likely to provide such services.

Employed elderly people have access to salaries and, on average, tend to be younger and healthier than retired elderly, as noted. They also are part of networks associated with their work roles. As Table 2 shows, older persons who are employed have higher...
rates of volunteering for organizations. The specific types of activities in which workers have elevated rates of participation might have a logical connection to work roles: workers are particularly likely to volunteer in a leadership capacity and to participate in citizenship-types of organizations. However, workers are not more likely to provide voluntary services to individuals or help to families.

Good health and ability to function, quite clearly, are resources. Elderly people with functional deficits have lower rates of participation in all three major forms of voluntary labor. We should note that although those elderly with functional problems have lower rates of volunteering, their contributions are nonetheless substantial. Among elders with one or more functional problems, about two-fifths do at least some volunteer work for organizations. (See Table 2.)

The old-old (75+) and the oldest-old (85+) are less likely than the young-old (under 75) to do all three kinds of volunteering. The differences between the youngest and oldest age groups in help to families and volunteer work for organizations are substantial (see Table 2). Age differences in help to families are likely to reflect the effects of family development in that the young-old are the most likely to have young children and grandchildren who need their services. It is notable that 23% of this sample of noninstitutionalized elderly who are 85+ describe volunteer work that they do for organizations. Moreover, among those who volunteer, age is not significantly related to the amount of time spent volunteering. Old-old and young-old volunteers are similar in the amount of time they spend doing volunteer work.

We might expect more volunteering in greater Minnesota, composed mostly of small towns and rural areas, than in the metropolitan Twin Cities area, but, overall, we find only small differences. The elderly in greater Minnesota are somewhat more likely to provide voluntary services to individuals and to do volunteer work for organizations. However, older volunteers in greater Minnesota do not contribute more time than the Twin Cities’ older volunteers. Two specific types of help that the elderly in greater Minnesota are more likely to provide than those in the Twin Cities are: to do church work and to help individuals with transportation. These two differences conform to images of smaller communities where we might expect more church involvement and more help to neighbors, especially because transportation is often a problem in small towns and rural areas.

Table 2 suggests that being a driver (or having a spouse who drives) has a major impact on the propensity to volunteer. The respondents were asked: “Do you (or your spouse) own and drive a car?” Drivers are more than twice as likely as nondrivers to do volunteer work for organizations and almost three times as likely to provide voluntary services to individuals. If volunteering is understood as one kind of leisure activity, then those who cannot drive are likely to lack an opportunity to participate in this, as well as other, leisure time activities. We can draw an interesting inference when we synthesize data from Tables 1 and 2. Table 2 suggests that nondrivers tend to be nonvolunteers, and Table 1 shows that the most frequent voluntary service to individuals is transportation. This suggests that elderly drivers help elderly nondrivers. This is one example of how the elderly, as a cohort and community, appear to help one another.

Table 2 does not include findings on gender and volunteering, because gender is not significantly related to any of the major categories of volunteering. Older men and women are about equally likely to be volunteers in general. However, our data suggest that older men and women tend to differ in the specific types of helping they choose to do. These differences largely conform to gender role expectations. Women are five times more likely to help other individuals with food and are somewhat more likely to do visiting or provide person-to-person care for individuals. The house and yard care type of help, which includes both yard work and repairs, is more likely done by older men. In volunteer work for organizations, women are more likely to do church work, to help with food for organizations, and to be involved with social welfare and health organizations. Men are somewhat more likely to work for citizenship-type organizations; these include a number of traditionally men-only clubs, like the Masons, Shriners, and Lions. Women are somewhat more likely than men to provide other services for organizations, including a variety of more or less unskilled types of jobs (e.g., stuffing envelopes, setting up and cleaning up after a social event, working in a gift shop), many of which have traditionally been done by women. One significant gender difference is that older women volunteers tend to spend more time in volunteer work than older men volunteers. Men are more likely to spend only 1–5 hours per month volunteering, whereas women are more likely to spend 15 hours a month or more. It may be that the specific types of work done by men versus women account, at least in part, for the differences in amount of time spent.

The Collection, Coding, and Classification of Data on Older Volunteers

In analyzing the data on voluntary service from the Minnesota Senior Study, we came to realize how little is actually known about volunteering, especially about older volunteers. For a start, we need to develop a more adequate definition of volunteer work. The phenomenon is intrinsically complex, as we have shown above in various ways. It might be tempting to simplify the definition by restricting volunteer work to formal, or organizational, activities. This would reduce the scope of the phenomenon studied and might eliminate some activities that would be particularly difficult to define and classify (such as “helping a friend”). It would also mean, however, that much contributed time would never be measured. It is likely that there are systematic biases.
associated with a restrictive definition — that is, service work by certain types of individuals (especially women) would be missed or undercounted.

The following definition, which is suggested here as a starting point, encompasses both formal and informal voluntary services: Volunteer work is a form of helping behavior that is nonobligatory and is not done for monetary compensation. This definition has three components, all of which relate to motivation. Defining volunteer work as a helping behavior is not very limiting in behavioral terms, because any service work can be defined as “helping.” Nonetheless, a central component of volunteer service is that it is motivated by altruism and the desire to give to or help others. The stipulations that voluntary service is nonobligatory and that is not done for the sake of pay specify the motivational context by negation. Both of these seem basic to the definition of voluntary, but both are also somewhat controversial.

Defining volunteer work as nonobligatory distinguishes voluntary service from other forms of service work that are involuntary but are also not done for pay (e.g., drafted military service or prison work). One controversial issue is how to classify work done within and for families. We have presented findings from the Minnesota Senior Study to many different audiences around the state and have raised the question of how to define volunteer work. We have found that people seem to have widely diverging opinions on the voluntary nature of family work. Most people seem to agree that caring for a child by a mother or father is obligatory. But there is no consensus about family services included in our category of “helping families” (i.e., caring for grandchildren, services to adult children, and caregiving for an ill or disabled relative). Some people are certain that such work is “family obligation” and is very different from volunteer work, whereas others are equally sure that such work is essentially the same as other forms of voluntary services to individuals in the community.

The lack of a monetary reward distinguishes volunteer service from paid work, but the division is not absolutely clear-cut. Sometimes paid workers are paid very low wages or contribute extra time, beyond the hours for which they are paid for (see Fischer & Eustis, 1989, for a study of home care workers). Sometimes volunteer workers are given small stipends in money or goods (or compensation for expenses). If volunteers are paid a compensation that amounts to pennies per hour of service, does that mean they should no longer be considered volunteers?

The classification of specific forms of voluntary activities is an empirical issue and will require research that may be similar to research on occupational classification (see Hauser & Featherman, 1977). Data from the Minnesota Senior Study and other surveys can be used to generate an initial list of volunteer activities, which could be augmented, elaborated, and specified through further research on volunteers.

In the initial coding of data from the Minnesota Senior Study, open-ended responses to questions on volunteer activities were categorized into 50 codes, which included both types of activities and types of organizations. Although 50 categories were far too many to analyze, these categories were too few to subsume the hundreds, possibly thousands, of differing volunteer jobs. The classification scheme shown in Table 1 was based on summarizing these 50 codes. Unfortunately, much information was missing, and it was not possible to do so feasible at the time of analysis (which occurred about a year after data collection) to call back respondents to clarify answers. Moreover, without a theoretical basis for creating the coding scheme from the beginning of our project, the attempt to create a descriptive classification framework was beset with ambiguities.

**Conceptual Framework for Classifying Volunteer Roles**

In Table 3, we have outlined a conceptual framework for classifying volunteer roles. The framework is organized around three dimensions: (1) whether the voluntary service is “formal” (arranged through an organization) or “informal” (arranged by individuals); (2) whether the activity entails a regular (ongoing) time commitment or an occasional (once or twice) commitment; and (3) the type of service activity. In this schema, there are three forms of service activities, all based on the orientation of the volunteer: person-to-community, person-to-object, and person-to-person. Two or three examples of volunteer roles are listed for each category.

**Formal Versus Informal Structure.** — The distinction between formal and informal services is commonly used in the literature on social support. The dichotomy is used here to differentiate between voluntary services attached to and arranged through organizations and those without such organizational affiliation. The distinction refers to the service structure rather than to the activity, because the same behavior may be arranged either formally or informally. The conceptual framework in Table 3 incorporates both formal and informal structures while creating an analytical distinction between the two. The framework does not specify whether or under what circumstances family work ought to be included as informal voluntary service, and this issue merits further study.

**Time.** — The time commitment dimension distinguishes between roles which are ongoing versus those associated with one episode or event. This dimension is important both substantively and methodologically for studies of volunteers. In formal structures, volunteers who have ongoing responsibilities have quasi-work roles and constitute the core staff of volunteer organizations. In informal volunteer roles, regular voluntary service is similar to responsibilities typically assigned to families. Categorizing a role as “regular” does not specify how much time is committed by a particular volunteer, but without this distinction we cannot even begin to measure amount of time contributed.


**Person-to-Community Services.** — The hallmark of these person-to-community roles is that these activities are public — the interactions are with the community or with large organizations or groups of people. Leadership roles (e.g., the president or treasurer of a charitable organization) fit this category. But other types of roles basically entail person-to-community contacts (e.g., an usher at a cultural event, the editor of a newsletter, the salesperson at a hospitality shop, or a performer at a charity concert). Table 3 outlines 10 categories of volunteer work, out of 12 possible combinations. There are two empty cells, because public roles, almost by definition, involve formal rather than informal structures.

**Person-to-Object Services.** — The essential feature of person-to-object roles is that, although the service is intended to help a person or group, the actual work centers on manipulating objects. This type of work includes stuffing envelopes for a charitable organization or political campaign, bookkeeping, baking a cake for a bake sale, housecleaning for a church or neighbor, fixing a car, or mowing a lawn. The service may or may not lead to contact with others (one can stuff envelopes alone or with others), but the performance of the work is oriented toward contact with objects rather than people.

**Person-to-Person Services.** — The defining characteristic of person-to-person services is that this type of work requires private and direct involvement with other individuals. Interestingly, although person-to-community services are essentially limited to formal structures, the converse is not true about person-to-person voluntary services — that is, this type of service work may be arranged on an informal basis or may be organized through a church or other organization. One obvious example of this type of service is caregiving. Note that caregiving can be formal or informal, regular or occasional. Person-to-person services are not necessarily as intimate as caregiving and also include personal services such as providing transportation, serving (not preparing) food, babysitting, and tutoring.

### A Need for Standard Categories

The categorization scheme offered in Table 3 is intended as a starting point, in the hopes of generating discussion and developing theory. There may be other ways to configure categories of volunteer work. What is badly needed are standard definitions and categories that can be shared among research projects.

Several reasons for using a classificatory framework much like this one in future research on volunteering exist. First, this three-dimensional framework is quite comprehensive and provides a way to classify specific forms of volunteer activities based on theoretical properties in terms of organizational structure, time, and behavior. Second, these standardized categories provide a logical way to analyze a wide variety of specific contexts for volunteer activities. The framework gives us 10 types of volunteer work instead of hundreds or thousands. Finally, this conceptual framework facilitates further analysis. Future surveys of older volunteers could be organized around these 10 types of volunteering. Using this framework, we can then begin to identify what motivates specific types of volunteer work, what limits or barriers are confronted by older volunteers in various forms of volunteer activities, and what further opportunities exist for developing or increasing productive contributions of older citizens.

---

**Table 3. Conceptual Categories for Classifying Volunteer Roles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of service activity</th>
<th>Formally volunteer work</th>
<th>Informally volunteer work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Permanent volunteer</td>
<td>Temporary volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-to-community</td>
<td>in public role</td>
<td>in public role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-to-object</td>
<td>Core volunteer for</td>
<td>Recruiter or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>general services to</td>
<td>general services to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>organizations</td>
<td>organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-to-person</td>
<td>Core volunteer for</td>
<td>Recruiter or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>personal service work</td>
<td>general tasks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Regular refers to an ongoing time commitment, and occasional refers to a voluntary service which is done once or twice, associated with an episode or event.

*Examples: Office of charitable organization, unpaid editor of newsletter for nonprofit organization.
*Examples: Chairperson of ad hoc committee, unpaid usher for cultural event.
*Examples: Envelope stuffer for political campaign, church handyperson.
*Examples: Cake baker for church bazaar, decoration maker for fundraising event.
*Examples: Bookkeeper for neighbor or friend, person who regularly shovels neighbor’s driveway for no pay.
*Examples: House watcher for travelling neighbor, person who fixes neighbor’s broken window.
*Examples: Driver for a senior center, language tutor, personal companion, sent by church group.
*Examples: Red Cross volunteer who helps victims during a natural disaster.
*Examples: Caregiver for someone who is disabled, person who drives neighbor to church weekly.
*Examples: Caregiver for someone with the flu, person who drives neighbor on one or two errands.

Vol. 31, No. 2, 1991
Committee on an Aging Society. (1986). Productive roles in an older society.


Announcing New Publications from AGHE


Nursing and Gerontology: Status Report, by Mary Ann Johnson & J. Richard Connelly, 1990. $5 for persons from AGHE member institutions; $20 non-members.


Send orders with payment to the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, 600 Maryland Ave., SW; West Wing 204, Washington, DC 20024, (202) 484-7505. Orders must be prepaid.