Aging, Voluntary Action, and the Third Sector in the United States and Europe

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One challenge facing the third sector of the industrialized nations of the world during the 21st century is demographic change. Throughout the industrialized world, individuals are living longer, while birth rates are declining, meaning that a decreasing number of will have to support an increasing number of elderly people. In the United States, the large baby boom generation, born in 1946-1964, is reaching the traditional age of retirement. As members of this generation exit the workforce, they deprive the economy of their labor. As they age, they place an increasing burden on health care and social services systems.

While the aging of society presents challenges for the third sector, it also provides opportunities. The new generation of elderly is better educated than previous generations and in better health. Traditional conceptions of retirement as a time of recreation and inactivity are being replaced by conceptions of retirement as a time of active, engaged leisure, which includes part-time employment and volunteer work. Thus, the new generation of elderly forms a potentially great resource for non-profit agencies as volunteers. Also, volunteer work has also been linked to better mental and physical health. Elderly volunteering thus offers a double benefit for the third sector, as it both creates a productive resource and decreases needs.

The papers in this panel explore how the aging of society provides challenges and opportunities for the third sector. Another paper examines the mechanisms by which volunteering reduces mortality among the elderly, using longitudinal data from the Netherlands. Together, the three papers explore both the causes of elderly volunteering and the effects, and will help policy makers and nonprofits maximize the social benefit of elderly volunteering.
An exploration of the mediating effect of cognitive ability on predictors of charitable giving

This paper explores ways in which cognitive ability may mediate a variety of relationships seen in previous research on charitable giving. We examine both the direct relationships and mediated relationships of a variety of charitable giving predictors including education, social resources, volunteering, age, and wealth.

This study uses data from the 1998-2006 Health and Retirement Study (HRS), a nationally representative survey of Americans over age 50. An examination of the over 50 age group is particularly relevant both because those over 50 contribute the majority of charitable giving dollars and because significant age-related cognitive declines typically occur after age 50. First, inter-individual differences are examined using cross-sectional data from the 2006 HRS. Second, intra-individual changes over time are examined using a fixed effects conditional logistic model with panel data from the 1998-2006 HRS. The impact of cognitive ability is then tested as an explanatory mechanism in the relationship between charitable giving and education, social resources, volunteering, age, and wealth using both longitudinal and cross-sectional approaches. Finally, other areas of potential confounding in charitable giving research due to the association with cognitive ability are discussed.

While both charitable giving and cognitive abilities have been studied extensively, the information is rarely gathered for the same individuals. Thus, relatively few studies have examined the relationship between cognitive abilities and charitable giving. However, a few studies have included measures related to both categories.

Bekkers’ (2006) examination of charitable giving using the Family Survey of the Dutch Population included a measurement of verbal proficiency. Respondents were measured on their ability to select the correct synonym from a list of five alternatives. In a two-stage Heckman regression, Bekkers (2006) found that verbal proficiency was a positive significant predictor of both the presence of charitable giving among all respondents and the level of charitable giving among donors. This was true even though the analysis controlled for a variety of possible mediating pathways such as income, wealth, education, subjective health, and personality. In some cases, verbal proficiency in a particular language may be a problematic measure of cognitive ability as it can be substantially influenced by immigrant or ethnic status.

In contrast to this positive relationship, Ben-Ner, Kong, and Putterman (2004) found that cognitive ability was negatively associated with giving in a dictator game experiment. In this experiment, undergraduate volunteers were paid $15 and, in addition, those selected as senders received 10 one-dollar bills. Each sender could choose to keep all the bills or send some to an anonymous undergraduate recipient participating in the same study located in a different room. Cognition was measured using the 50-item Wonderlic test. The ordinary least squares estimate indicated that for female participants (for whom the effect was largest) "a one standard deviation increase in the cognitive score would decrease the amount shared by a female sender ... by about 19%" (p. 588). The authors offer two explanations for these findings. First, this relationship could be explained by the self-interested neo-classical economic view that sharing in such a dictator game is simply the result of error and those with higher cognitive abilities are less likely to make such an error. Alternatively, sharing may be driven by self-interest and the idea that "only fools are kind when there is nothing in it for them" (p. 583).

In the HRS, cognitive ability was measured in a variety of ways. These measurements included immediate word recall, delayed word recall, serial 7’s, recognition tasks, backwards counting tasks, and a 35-point scale combining each of the previous elements. For the immediate word recall task, the interviewer read one of four possible lists of 10 nouns to the respondent. After the word list was read, respondents were asked to recall as many words as possible from the list. Working memory was assessed using the serial 7’s test. For this test, respondents were asked "One hundred minus 7 equals what?" After responding, the interviewer then repeatedly asked "And 7 from that?" for a total of five trials.
For the backwards counting task respondents were asked, "please try to count backward as quickly as you can from the number I will give you. Please start with 20". Finally, the total score from all previous sections as well as a word recognition section from the Telephone Interview for Cognitive Status was added together to create a combined 35-point cognitive score. This combined 35-point scale has been used in several studies on cognition in the medical literature.

Data from the HRS indicated that higher cognitive ability – measured through a variety of cognitive tests – was associated with a higher probability of charitable giving, even after controlling for such intervening mechanisms as age, income, wealth, health, and education. This connection may be critical to understanding a variety of associations found in previous research on charitable giving. For example, greater age has been positively associated with charitable giving, except in late life when further aging has been negatively associated with charitable giving. Regression results indicate that this late life phenomenon can be explained through the mechanism of cognitive changes. Other areas of potential confounding due to this giving-cognition link are also discussed including education, social resources, volunteering and wealth.

References:


Retired supervolunteers: Who are they, and how do we get one?

As the demographics of developed nations change, and a larger proportion of the population is elderly, nonprofit organizations are making increasing use of retired volunteers. Not all retired volunteers are equal, however; some contribute only occasional volunteer time, while others contribute substantial amounts of time and take on important roles. This paper focuses on retired “supervolunteers,” whom I define as people who are over sixty years old, have left the full-time labor force, and now devote ten or more hours per week to volunteering. Many of these volunteers bring substantial skills to their jobs, and by devoting a lot of time to their volunteer work, they can take on roles normally performed by paid staff. While these volunteers are rare, they have a high value to nonprofit organizations, beyond that of typical retired volunteers.

While there has been substantial research on retired volunteering in general (see Musick and Wilson, 2008, for a review), no scholarly research has focused on this sub-group of highly involved volunteers. Some popular accounts have highlighted the contributions of highly involved retired volunteers (Freedman, 1999; Steinhorn, 2006), and a few of the highly altruistic people in Colby and Damon’s (1992) academic study of “moral exemplars” were retirees. Other than this, research on retired volunteers does not distinguish between occasional and highly active volunteers. These groups make a different contribution to nonprofits, and different factors may cause people to become occasional volunteers and highly active volunteers.

The current paper explores the character, work history, and volunteering history of retired supervolunteers in the United States, using both survey and interview methods. I use the Midlife in the United States (MidUS) study, and the Center on Philanthropy Panel Study (COPPS) module of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), to compare three groups of elderly people: those who do not volunteer, those who volunteer in small to moderate amounts, and those who volunteer ten or more hours per week. I contrast these three groups on numerous factors that other studies have found to correlate with volunteering, including pre-retirement occupation, satisfaction with work before retirement, past volunteering, education, income, religiosity, prosocial role identity, and sense of moral obligation. The use of panel data makes possible accurate measurement of retirees’ pre-retirement occupational data, volunteer histories, and other information.

In addition to the survey data, I will present the results of in-depth interviews with a selective sample of retired supervolunteers living in the area of Chicago. The interviews focus on issues of motivation, religious and spiritual beliefs, work history, volunteer history, ideas about the nature of retirement, and how nonprofits either place barriers in the way of volunteering or encourage highly active volunteers.

The findings of this study will be of interest of scholars who study volunteering, the elderly, and nonprofit organizations, but will be of particular value to organizations who seek to recruit elderly volunteers. By understanding the differences between ordinary retired volunteers and highly active ones, and by understanding how nonprofits can encourage or discourage high volunteering, this study will help nonprofits gain access to this important resource.

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How volunteering reduces mortality: Mediating mechanisms

Volunteering positively affects a variety of health outcomes: volunteering decreases depression, enhances subjective well being, and, ultimately, decreases mortality (Harris and Thoresen, 2005). This study addressed the question how volunteering decreases mortality risk through enhanced psychological well being, subjective health, and social networks. We use data from the Longitudinal Amsterdam Study of Aging (LASA). This unique panel study provides four waves of data on some 3,800 individuals who were 55 years and over in 1992 (birth years 1908 to 1937) and were followed up over a period of 10 years. At the end of the study, 29.2% of the respondents who participated in at least two waves had died. The mortality rate was only 18.9% among those who volunteered at some point during the study. In fixed effects regression models, volunteering was found to increase network size, the sense of mastery, and subjective health, and to decrease neuroticism and depression. Random effects probit regressions of mortality risk revealed that network size, subjective health and mastery mediated 44% of the volunteering effect. We conclude that volunteering reduces mortality through maintenance of social relationships and psychological health.

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