

Diversity and participation in volunteering: the contribution of older adults to voluntary organisations and communities

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Old age (50+, in line with NHS and Age Concern's definition) can offer people an unprecedented opportunity to engage in voluntary work. In doing so, it is suggested that through volunteering, people can improve their quality of life, gain satisfaction, pleasure, a sense of meaning and a way to meet people, as well as giving great benefit to communities of place and of interest. Yet current government policy in England risks stifling the environment in which older people can give their time and efforts.

My research explores what older people's motives for engaging and continuing to engage with voluntary work are, and what it is about the particular work they undertake which encourages them to give their time. Alongside this, voluntary organisations will be studied to explore the extent to which they value older volunteers.

Research Context

Whilst volunteering, both in the form of philanthropy and mutual-aid, has been a feature of British civil society for hundreds of years, the last 15 years have seen the voluntary sector move to centre-stage in English political discourse. A raft of policies have been devised with the aim of increasing participation in voluntary work, re-energising communities and (re)integrating citizens with society (Doyle and Smith, 1999).

However, these policies have largely ignored the contribution that older people can and do make within the voluntary sector, as well as in the public and private sectors, and the huge benefits to individuals and society that can be created by older people participating in voluntary work. A voluntary sector bidding for contracts from the public sector is professionalising, and this may involve the exclusion of those deemed too old for paid work, but who often have a great deal to offer to their community.

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Research Methods

An **online survey** of voluntary organisations, exploring the extent to which involve with older volunteers and the roles they undertake. It is anticipated that the survey will produce a database of at least 200 organisations.

Interviews with the chief executives of 20 voluntary sector organisations, 10 which routinely engage with older volunteers and 10 which do not. The interviews will focus on the reasons for this engagement, or lack of.

Interviews with 20 older volunteers, 10 from an organisation which provide services for older people and 10 from an organisation which does not. These interviews will explore their pathways into and attachment to volunteering.

Research Questions

My work seeks to build upon previous studies, using the following research questions as a guide;

- What is the extent to which voluntary organisations value older volunteers?
- How can these values be used to encourage voluntary organisations to engage further with older volunteers?

- What are the meanings and motives that underpin older peoples' participation in, and attachment to, voluntary work?
- What benefits can voluntary organisations and the older adults that volunteer with them derive from the voluntary work undertaken?
- How can this inform policy to enhance citizenship rights of older people?