

Article

## The Role of Volunteering in an Era of Cultural Transition: Can It Provide a Role Identity for Older People from Asian Cultures?

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Received: 21 June 2010; in revised form: 25 July 2010 / Accepted: 27 July 2010 /

Published: 29 July 2010

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**Abstract:** In western countries, one of the challenges facing ageing populations is an absence of social roles. One response to this is to volunteer, with evidence suggesting that this assigns meaning to the lives of older people and enhances health and well-being. This holds potential significance for older people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and particularly those from Asian cultures, where there is evidence that cultural erosion is diminishing older people's traditional roles. However, while volunteering can create role identities for older people, it may also further challenge existing cultural values. This paper debates these issues, drawing on a growing body of evidence relating to volunteering within Asian cultures.

**Keywords:** volunteering; ageing; role identity; cultural diversity

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### 1. Introduction

The ageing of the population is a phenomenon experienced across the world, as a growing proportion of the global population routinely lives into old age [1]. This phenomenon is creating a range of challenges to economic and social structures, raising concerns relating to how such a large proportion of older people can be supported by a shrinking working population. As a result, agencies such as the World Health Organisation and the United Nations are increasingly focusing on how to keep ageing populations active, healthy and involved [2]. This approach is in line with new conceptual

approaches to ageing, which reframe the ageing experience to focus on active and continued involvement in society, promoting concepts such as productive ageing, ageing well or active ageing [3]. These approaches challenge the traditional biomedical perceptions of older people as helpless, frail and in need of care by focusing on the positive contributions older people make to society [4,5]. One important example of how older people remain active and involved is through volunteering.

There is considerable variation in the international literature relating to how volunteering is defined, with most studies referring to volunteering as an organised activity undertaken willingly through an organisation or group [6]. However, it is important to recognise that much volunteer activity is undertaken informally and is more spontaneous, and that these helping activities are often described as civic engagement. Generally, in this paper, we refer to volunteering as a formal activity unless otherwise noted.

Theoretical approaches to ageing propose that there are substantial psycho-social benefits to be gained from volunteer activities in later life [7]. These benefits are reflected in the broad range of empirical studies exploring the relationship between volunteering and positive health outcomes as people age. In this paper, these benefits are explored, utilising role identity theory to examine how volunteering is a positive activity for older people, particularly for those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds within their own countries, and as migrants in western cultures. Additionally, this paper also explores the cultural implications and barriers to volunteering for older people from Asian cultures.

## **2. A Role for the Role-Less**

Role identity theory, developed from social psychology, posits that individuals classify themselves and others according to their social roles [8]. As people age and relinquish paid work and primary family caring roles, these role shifts impact on their role identity. Applying these theories to describe the processes that older people undertake in devising their future life plans may be utilised in order to better understand why volunteering is good for you in later life [9]. Role identity theory suggests that individuals adopt multiple roles which have varying levels of salience, and these roles have associated behavioural expectations. Thus, adoption of these roles is interconnected with perceptions of self, such that individuals seek to legitimise roles to which they are committed [10,11]. According to this theoretical perspective, roles and their salience are stable across time and situations [12] and individuals will seek to reinforce their role perceptions. As a result, an identity is formed, which is motivated by factors such as self-esteem, efficacy, consistency and regulation [13].

A key dimension of role identity is role enhancement [14], and this assumes that there are benefits to be gained through the accumulation of coherent social roles, and that these benefits include an enhanced sense of identity as well as emotional gratification. Greenfield and Marks [15] concur that multiple roles in late adulthood are beneficial to well-being and within this context, volunteering may have a buffering effect contributing to the human need to be productive and maintain meaning throughout the lifespan [16,17].

Thus, social roles such as volunteering are important to role identity, and can augment the psychological and social losses commonly associated with ageing. Continued activity through role

maintenance can help influence better adjustment to critical life events such as changes to the family structure, loss of paid work or loss of spouse [18], as well as lessening the effects associated with low income [19]. Where loss is experienced, people adopt social roles that enhance their sense of identity, while culling those that do not benefit their well-being [20]. As these activities commonly involve helping family, friends and neighbours, they are also associated with positive social engagement [11]. In the face of role loss, civic engagement such as volunteering can offer privilege, power, status, gratification, and allow individuals to perceive themselves as competent and valued members of the community [21]. These benefits are considered important by those who choose to volunteer [22].

Role identity theory is perhaps particularly appropriate in relation to the traditional pathways of retirement by men. In this way, volunteering offers a new role for those who have had a lifelong commitment to paid work, and who may be seeking new ways to be involved and active on retirement. However, interestingly, volunteering is also important for older women [9]. Thus, role identity theory proposes that women are more likely to adopt multiple roles and that maintaining some of these roles throughout life is important for well-being [12,23]. Findings from an Australian study demonstrate that older women tend to maintain their roles into later adulthood and these roles involve helping their families and their communities, and are generally based on gendered identities [9]. As well as contributing to the sustainability and social cohesiveness of their families and communities, women also highlighted the positive meaning that these multiple roles gave their lives. Despite arguments that gendered roles have constrained women into low status activities, it may be that according to role identity theory, role differentiation offers advantages to women as they age [9]. Significantly, research also suggests that as men and women age they construct new gender identities which rely less on traditional stereotypes [24] and are more androgynous in their manifestation. Thus, as people age, they may be more open to new roles beyond gender stereotypes.

### **3. A Means to Good Health**

In general, the social connectedness associated with volunteering leads to a number of health benefits [25], and a large body of evidence consistently demonstrates that older volunteers have better health than non-volunteers [26,27]. Studies indicate that volunteering is associated with indicators of good health such as better self reported health [25]; fewer depressive symptoms [28]; higher life satisfaction [25]; and lower rates of mortality [29]. Older volunteers generally enjoy better health and reduced mortality than their non-volunteering peers [30,31]. However, it should be noted that some of the literature highlights that not all volunteering is good for health at all times [32]. Thus, for example, some studies suggest that the relationship between volunteering and health is in fact curvilinear, and that the positive health effects taper off as the volunteer hours increase [26,33].

Whilst many of these studies are unable to provide a reason for the relationship between volunteering and good health, a number of authors have surmised that volunteering is an activity that gives life meaning and provides a purpose in life associated with good psychological health [9,25,34]. In this way, the community becomes a substitute for the work sphere when individuals retire and other roles are absent. This is particularly important for older people, as studies have indicated that feelings of control in regard to self-valued roles generally decline with age [35], and at the latter end of the life

span, emotionally based goals become more important than the attainment of knowledge and skills [36].

Thus, the benefits of volunteering, and its association with positive health outcomes, are attributed to the capacity of volunteering to provide new role identities for older people. Volunteering is perceived by volunteers as a useful and productive activity, which provides them with a key role and sense of purpose in life [32]. This is important not only intrinsically, but in the eyes of others. As Finkelstein [37] suggests, while the development of a volunteer role identity is an intrinsic quality, it also dictates how others perceive you. This can also be beneficial to well-being from an external perspective, as it can counteract ageist assumptions regarding the capacity of older people to contribute to society. Further, a volunteer identity has been shown to reduce concerns of families about the physical and mental wellbeing of an older person [19].

Thus, in summary, having a positive role identity is important throughout life, and employing role identity theory [12] allows us to focus on the purpose of these activities. This theoretical perspective proposes that our role identities are important throughout life, and that these roles give our lives meaning and context [12]. This is particularly important for older people from culturally diverse backgrounds, who can experience both losses associated with ageing, as well as those related to cultural erosion and decline.

#### **4. Volunteering in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Cultures**

The evidence suggests that volunteering may be particularly important in maintaining role identity for older people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The relevance of volunteering and role identity to culturally diverse individuals is underscored by the potential importance of cultural generativity to human development, as proposed by Kotre [38]. This expands Erikson's concept of generativity as imparting a legacy for future generations to explore the human need to pass on societal traditions and ways of life. Narratives are constructed to pass on beliefs, traditions, ideas, knowledge, customs and cultural standards [39]. However, a study by Cheng *et al.* [40] suggests that undertaking generative acts is becoming increasingly challenging for older people in the technical age, as they perceive that they have nothing to teach the younger generation. This is compounded by the often limited educational opportunities of the older generation in comparison to their children and grandchildren [41]. Therefore, attempts to educate or assist are often rebuffed or criticised, and in such cases, older people may adopt passive generative roles in order to maintain positive relationships with offspring [41], or make a conscious effort to lessen the burden on their offspring by means of maintaining good health [40,42]. Given that older people are less able to perform generative acts within the family context, volunteering can provide alternate roles and opportunities for positive interaction.

However, evidence from a study of migrants in one western country, Australia, suggests that current definitions of volunteering which focus on formal volunteering tend to under-represent the richness of social capital in contemporary multicultural Australian society [43]. This study explored ways that older people from diverse cultural backgrounds contribute to their communities by participating in informal civic engagement. Findings highlighted three main themes. First, that older people view themselves as repositories of cultural knowledge within their communities. Second, older people saw

that they had community responsibilities to others within their cultural group, which extended beyond their immediate family. The final theme that emerged from this study related to the special role that older people have with the young within their cultural communities.

A second Australian study also focused on the importance of civic engagement to Indigenous people in Australia, and found that the roles and experiences of older Indigenous people are also critical to their identity and status within their culture [44]. This includes cultural activities such as performing traditional welcoming ceremonies, or passing on their cultural beliefs to the next generation, as well as supporting troubled young people, an increasingly important role within the contemporary context. The study concluded that all of these activities are essential to building a community that includes indigenous customs, mores and values, and hence are crucial in contemporary Australia. The opportunities for Indigenous people to become involved in formal volunteering are somewhat limited, however, this evidence suggests that older Indigenous people, as well as those from other culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, are able to draw on their culture in terms of informal voluntary activities or civic engagement.

These studies suggest that these activities offer a special role for minority cultures within western society, and may be particularly important in maintaining and promoting cultural knowledge and values within a broader western society. These roles are also important within the cultural group, where older people are respected and valued. A number of international studies [45] suggest that being a grandparent may be a marker of social ageing and particularly significant for those from different cultural backgrounds. As Mjelde-Mossey [46] suggests in the Chinese context, old age is synonymous with increased value, position and status within the family.

This all suggests that these activities merit consideration in a multicultural context, and that they are important in terms of generativity. There is also emerging evidence that volunteering as a more formal activity through organizations or groups is growing in significance for older people from culturally and linguistically diverse cultures, and particularly Asian cultures. Volunteering, in this way, acts as an important role identity and in turn challenges these traditional cultural roles. Furthermore, the same connection between volunteering and good health has been shown in Asian populations. One study, for example, showed that those who volunteer are also said to experience improved life satisfaction and fewer psychological symptoms [47].

While volunteering is less prevalent in ageing Chinese populations than in Western cultures [47], studies have indicated that it is becoming gradually more important to older people within Asian cultures. The growth of interest in volunteering can perhaps be seen as a result of the erosion of traditional cultural roles due to increased immigration to, and contact with Western culture [48]. As Mjelde-Mossey [46] has observed, Chinese elders who migrate to non-Western societies may encounter significant challenges to cultural traditions, which accelerates cultural change. For Asian elders residing in their native countries, cultural change is hastened by rapid population growth, an influx of migrants [49], and the migration of children to other countries or cities [50]. Additionally, studies have suggested that given the mandatory retirement age in a number of non-Western countries, older men in particular may experience reduced well-being due to an absence of roles, and consequently volunteering is on the rise among older Japanese men [51]. Indeed, volunteering in Japan is said to have emerged as a significant activity after the 1995 Kobe earthquake, with recent surveys suggesting about 10 per cent of the population volunteer regularly and 25 per cent have experienced

volunteering [52]. Full time work has been the norm for men and household duties for women in Japan and other south-east Asian countries, but changing family roles, as well as retirement from paid work, have impacted on older men and women's involvement in volunteering. In Asian countries, as a result of social change, older people are now more likely to live alone outside the family structure and may need to rely on less traditional forms of social support, including an exchange of favours [49]. One result has been the growth of interest in time banks in Japan and other Asian countries, where older people contribute their time as volunteers with the intention of drawing on the time of other volunteers when they need to do so [53].

The decline in traditional Asian culture in response to Westernisation has significantly affected the familial roles performed by older people in these societies. Older Asian women have traditionally acted as caregivers and teachers of cultural values, while older men have occupied positions as leaders of the family. When these positions of significance are lost, through cultural transition, older people experience reduced self-worth, marginalisation and feelings of irrelevance, both to their families and within society, a loss of identity, networks, purpose and meaning, and a lack of certainty that the younger generation will honour and obey their wishes [46,48,54]. This is particularly emphasised in older women, as there are few other opportunities for females to experience social significance [46].

Given that generativity is only beneficial to well-being when one's actions are appreciated and respected by others [41], and cultural generativity is declining, it has been suggested that volunteering can fill this void [48]. Cheung and Kwan [50] suggest that increasing capacity for self determination may alleviate the negative influence of modernisation on cultural norms, and studies examining motives and benefits for volunteering by older people in Asian countries have, as in Western cultures, linked meaning and purpose to their experiences [48,55]. One study of older Hong-Kong Chinese determined that the majority of participants saw more opportunities to practice generativity outside the family unit, and felt that they received more respect from the people they assisted than from their children and grandchildren [41].

## **5. Barriers and Implications of Volunteering for Older People from Asian Cultures**

The evidence thus far would suggest that volunteering has the potential to fill the void left by losses associated with ageing and cultural decline both as minorities within western cultures and in their own home countries. However, research has demonstrated that ethnic minorities who have fewer social and economic resources are less likely to be able to overcome structural, economic barriers to volunteer. It is therefore important to make sure that these disadvantaged subpopulations of older people are targeted [56], as there is evidence that disadvantaged older people obtain more positive effects from volunteer involvement and are able to move into the sphere beyond immediate family [19].

However, as a number of authors have noted [47,57], within Asian cultures there is a 'cultural push and pull' factor involved in volunteering. While it may address role identity and generativity issues arising from the rapid erosion of traditional culture, volunteering may also present challenges to this existing culture. In Chinese culture, for example, co-operating with others is viewed as more important than personal gain, and cultural norms suggest that being good to others results in better luck, particularly in the afterlife [47]. Further, countries such as Japan are said to have a strong volunteer ethic derived from Confucian concepts of community, and volunteers are seen as fulfilling their social

duty [58]. However, there is a contradiction in that it is also expected that the individual will acquiesce to the preferences of the primary group, the family, and their self worth is dependent on their defined role as a contributing family member [46]. The expectation is thus that older people will give primarily to their family. Further, if the family is averse to volunteering for cultural reasons, it is unlikely that the older person will be supported to do so.

Additionally, the concept of filial piety, based around Confucianism, suggests that elders are to be honoured, obeyed and cared for by their families [54]. Consequently, there is an expectation that Asian elders will spend their time with their families in recognition of this support [59], and undertake defined cultural roles such as caring for grandchildren, or educating them in socio-cultural norms and rituals [46]. This may cause significant confusion in role identities, particularly if older Asian people feel it is their cultural duty to undertake these roles, but it may not be required or expected by the families. This can result in conflict with younger generations who have experienced acculturation, and resent the advice and education provided by the elder [46]. Therefore, attempts to maintain traditional cultural roles in the face of increased Westernisation may actually further diminish role identity for older people.

Studies have also observed that if older Chinese partake in any form of work after retirement, including unpaid work, this is seen as unfilial, and reflects poorly upon the family, in that it is perceived that they are not providing adequately for their elderly family member [47,57]. This is supported by studies indicating that those already volunteering, or planning to volunteer, were less likely to be supported by adult children [55,59]. From the perspective of older Asians, this evidence is highly paradoxical. While volunteering may provide a role and purpose in the face of cultural decline experienced through Westernisation, it may also further erode their cultural values, resulting in further experience of loss.

## 6. Conclusion

Volunteering provides an important social role for those who may otherwise be role-less, and it is well known that one of the challenges of ageing is the loss of social roles, both within a work and family context. Volunteering offers an opportunity for older people to adopt new roles or to continue with existing social roles at a time of change. As such, many older people highlight the benefit of volunteering as giving their lives meaning, linked to generativity and positive human development. The evidence overwhelmingly states that volunteering, as a result, is associated with good psychological health outcomes for older people.

The evidence put forward in this paper suggests that volunteering may be of particular importance to those from minority cultures within western societies, whose marginal status may result in only limited roles being available to them. Further, emerging evidence is suggesting that, within Asian countries, volunteering may provide a key role for those affected by the erosion of traditional family and cultural values. However, in certain circumstances, this may have a negative impact and result in further eroding of cultural norms and roles, resulting in increased family conflict and reduced well-being. This is highly paradoxical, in that older people who experience role loss as a result of cultural change may be inhibited in locating new roles due to prevailing cultural norms and attitudes.

From this perspective, further education is needed to ensure that families, as well as older people themselves, are informed of the benefits of volunteering, as the support of family is integral in ensuring participation. Also significantly, support for minority cultures to volunteer in western nations needs to be culturally sensitive, as it is compensating for much more than age related loss. Attention needs to be paid to social inclusion of appropriate roles and recognition for those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who wish to volunteer [43]. Programs and policies need to target these groups and recognise the generative aspect of volunteering for those from different cultures. Such attention is integral in ensuring the continued well-being and social inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse older people in an era of cultural transition.

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