

## Motivations for Volunteering Abroad in Later Life

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### Abstract

*Despite a high prevalence of older adults serving abroad each year, researchers have not investigated their motivations for service. A series of categorical data analyses compare the motivations of 1010 international volunteers that served with two secular volunteer-sending organizations. The top motivations for volunteering did not differ significantly across age groups. However, international volunteers aged 55 or older ( $n = 56$ ) were less likely to volunteer abroad to gain useful skills, to gain international experience and language skills, or because they need a job. Implications for volunteer management, recruitment, retention and future research are discussed.*

**Key Words:** aging, international, motivations, volunteering, quantitative

### Introduction

Each year in the United States, about 250,000 adults aged 55 or older volunteer abroad (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). With the baby boomer bulge moving upward, it is anticipated that older adults will increasingly take advantage of opportunities to remain productive in their later years. By embracing new found freedoms from parenting and paid work responsibilities, older adults entering their “third age” of life may recognize that volunteering abroad can fulfill their desires to give back during a time of life that is also marked with renewed interest in personal growth, enrichment, and

discovery (Warburton, Paynter, & Petriwskyj, 2007).

Despite the high prevalence of older adults serving abroad each year, researchers have not investigated their motivations for service. As a result, progressive policies aiming to address the growing supply of, and demand for, older adults are often promoted with little information about how to meet the needs of older adults serving abroad. More information is needed to take full advantage of the skills and interest of older volunteers. This study aims to inform volunteer resource management by exploring how the motivations of older

international volunteers vary from those of younger generations.

### **Motivations for Volunteering in Later Life**

Past studies researching the motivations for volunteering among older adults have primarily focused on domestic volunteering (Choi & Chou, 2010). Although very little is known about older adults' motivations for volunteering abroad, we can deduce that motivations for volunteering abroad likely vary across the life course. Older adults' life tasks, experiences, and concerns are different from those of younger adults. One of the earliest studies to delineate these differences was conducted by the ICR Survey Research Group (1991). In this study, telephone interviews with 962 adults aged 60 years or older revealed that the three most common volunteer motivations were "to help others (83%)," "to feel useful or productive (65%)," and "to fulfill a moral responsibility (51%)".

A few years later, Clary et al., (1998) specified a functional approach to volunteering, and introduced six motivational functions. According to their functional approach, motivations can be categorized into six primary factors: (1) values: "to express or act on important values", (2) understanding: "to learn more about the world", (3) enhancement: "to grow and develop psychologically", (4) career: "gaining career-related experience", (5) social: "to strengthen social relationship", and (6) protective: "to reduce negative feelings". Findings suggest that motivations for the values, social, and enhancement factors are similar across age groups, but career, understanding, and protective factors tend to be more important for younger participants. A subsequent study noted consistent findings but suggested that the social motive was more important among

older than younger volunteers (Okun, Barr, & Herzog, 1998).

Okun and Schultz (2003) further examined the relationship between age and the six volunteer motives proposed by Clary et al. (1998), and added a new seventh factor: "making friends". Their study found that age is positively associated with social motivations and inversely associated with career and understanding motivations. This provided further support to the conclusion that older volunteers are less motivated by career motives when comparing with younger volunteers, and that the social motive is more important among older than younger volunteers.

A later study by Dávila and Diaz-Morales (2009), investigated the effects of age on volunteering in Spain, and also found that, as age increases, the career, understanding, and making friends motivations decrease, while social and value motivations increase. Choi & Chou (2010) also concluded that older adults are not typically seeking to advance career goals via networking or direct skill practice, but that "finding a sense of purpose through continued social engagement, by leaving a positive legacy, and through getting to know other volunteers" are important motivational factors (p. 561). Chambré's activity theory (1984) suggests that older adults volunteer to remain productive in later life, and may substitute volunteer service for role loss in older age. This is also supported by Sherman and Shavit's "lifecycle hypothesis" (2012), which predicts that adults volunteer after retirement to maintain immaterial consumption patterns they became accustomed to in younger years.

Gerontologists refer to "life review" or "what have I done with my life" as a key reason explaining why a desire for a meaningful experience may be so prominent among older adults (Pope, 2009). Life review is associated with development

theory, wherein older adults who believe they did not accomplish what they desired during middle adulthood may feel a sense of regret or despair as they review their life (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986). Although volunteer engagement at this stage is often associated with altruistic motives and a desire to give back, reflection on one's life may also be associated with a desire for adventure and challenge that was not possible in earlier years filled with work and family responsibilities. Ultimately, decisions to volunteer likely depend on both altruistic and egoistic motivations that affect older adults' quality of life (Shye, 2010). This study seeks to further understand motivations by examining international volunteers' motivations across the life course.

**Methods**

The sampling frame used to assess motivations includes volunteers that served

with two US-based secular non-profit international volunteer cooperation organizations (IVCOs) during the period of 2002 to 2010. The first IVCO places around 3,000 volunteers each year in one of 19 countries in the Global South. Placements range from 1-12 weeks, with an average duration of four weeks. During their placement, volunteers typically live in urban settings and cohabit with other volunteers. The second IVCO places about 300 volunteers per year in one of 12 countries in the Global South. About 70 percent of volunteers serve for 10-12 months, while the remaining 30 percent serve for three to four months. Volunteers teach in a variety of educational settings and work as full-time teachers. These volunteers live in both rural and urban settings and most volunteers live with a host family or in teacher housing on the school campus. Specific demographics of the older adults responding to the survey are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographics of international volunteers age 55 or older (n=56)**

Gender	Percentage <sup>1</sup>
Male	21.4%
Female	78.6%
Household Income	
0-19,999	22.4%
20,000-39,999	10.1%
40,000-59,999	14.3%
60,000-74,999	18.4%
75,000-99,999	16.3%
100,000-149,999	8.2%
150,000 or more	10.2%
Race	
White	86.8%
Black	5.7%
Other	7.6%
Marital Status	
Married	37.0%
Divorced, widowed, or separated	46.3%
Never married	16.7%

Education	
Up to high school or GED	11.1%
Some college	5.5%
Bachelor's degree	31.5%
Master's degree and above	51.9%
Average age (55+)	65.0 years

<sup>1</sup>Numbers may not equal 100% due to rounding

To assess motivations, participants took to the International Volunteer Impacts Survey (IVIS). (See Lough, McBride, & Sherraden, 2009). The IVIS assesses motivations by asking respondents to reply to the prompt: "Please indicate how much the following factors influenced you to inquire about volunteering internationally." All response options used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. An open-ended response option was also provided to assess additional motivations. In total, 1010 volunteers responded—a 48 percent response rate. However, only 56 respondents (5.6%) were aged 55 to 90 years at the time of service—thereby limiting the power of statistical conclusions. In addition, because volunteers from only two IVCOs were surveyed, data are not fully representative of the population of older international volunteers.

### Analysis

A one-way ANOVA was used to compare differences in the motivations of international volunteers across age groups. Six age groups in ten year increments were originally used in the analysis. However, due to low statistic power and lack of significant differences between the two age groups "55-64" and "65 and older", these groups were combined for a more valid analysis of motivations. The assumption of homoscedasticity was tested using Levene's test. In cases where sample variances were

unequal, the Welch's t-test was used to test for mean differences among age groups. In addition, post-hoc analyses were conducted to explore differences between age groups. The Tukey's HSD test was used when sample variances were determined to be equal; whereas Games-Howell test was used to detect discrete differences between age groups when sample variances were unequal.

### Results

The primary motivations for volunteering abroad, as reported by adults 55 years or older included: (1) to have a challenging or meaningful experience, (2) to make a difference by helping others, and (3) to gain greater cross-cultural understanding. (See Table 2). As primary motivations, these reasons did not differ significantly from volunteers in younger age groups. However, in comparison with younger volunteers, older adults were significantly less likely than those aged 16 to 44 to volunteer in order to gain useful skills in school or a job (Welch = 38.35,  $df_1 = 4$ ,  $df_2 = 139.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ). They were also less likely than those aged 16 to 24 to volunteer because they needed a job (Welch = 8.19,  $df_1 = 4$ ,  $df_2 = 147.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ) or because they wanted to gain international experience and language skills (Welch = 8.26,  $df_1 = 4$ ,  $df_2 = 137.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ). (See Table 3).

**Table 2: Motivations of International Volunteers by Age Group**

Motivation	Age Group									
	15-24 (N=654)		25-34 (N=454)		35-44 (N=79)		45-54 (N=40)		55+ (N=56)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I wanted to have a challenging and meaningful experience	6.56	.98	6.59	.97	6.46	1.22	6.53	.89	6.71	.57
I had a desire to make a difference by helping others	6.41	1.10	6.43	1.06	6.35	1.34	6.37	1.20	6.44	.96
I wanted to gain greater cross-cultural understanding	6.44	.96	6.35	1.04	6.19	1.22	6.13	1.26	6.31	.96
I wanted to travel or live abroad	6.34	1.18	6.28	1.24	5.87	1.56	5.58	1.48	5.80	1.74
I had a desire to participate in volunteering as a way to reduce social or economic inequality	5.74	1.35	5.74	1.35	5.06	1.78	5.61	1.39	5.56	1.33
I wanted to gain international experience and language skills	6.26*	1.19	6.22	1.11	5.79	1.6	5.18	1.67	5.16*	2.11
I wanted to make friends and meet people	4.98	1.66	4.66	1.74	4.51	1.88	4.26	1.96	4.31	2.03
I thought that the volunteer experience would give me skills useful in school or in a job	5.56*	1.48	5.38*	1.56	4.24*	1.92	3.42	1.86	3.13*	1.85
A friend or co-worker was involved with the organization	2.64	2.00	2.37	1.98	2.11	1.79	2.11	1.89	2.09	1.69
I was asked by a school or organization	2.06	1.69	1.80	1.48	1.75	1.37	1.50	1.31	1.62	1.27
I needed a job	2.41*	1.77	2.11	1.67	1.81	1.53	1.57	1.46	1.56*	1.27
I was required to volunteer as part of a course requirement	1.65	1.34	1.58	1.29	1.61	1.27	1.58	1.45	1.47	1.09

*\*Indicates a significantly different mean between the age group denoted and the reference group of older adults age 55 or older. See Table 3 for tests of significance.*

**Table 3: ANOVA Motivations of International Volunteers**

	Levene's test	F	Welch's test	G-H post-hoc
I was asked by a school or organization	6.29***	na	3.31*	none <sup>ψ</sup>
I wanted to gain greater cross-cultural understanding	1.42	1.75	na	na
I wanted to have a challenging and meaningful experience	2.01	.57	na	na
I was required to volunteer as part of a course requirement	.73	.34	na	na
A friend or co-worker was involved with the organization	2.26	2.74*, <sup>ψ</sup>	na	na
I wanted to make friends and meet people	2.91*	na	3.92**	none <sup>ψ</sup>
I had a desire to make a difference by helping others	.47	.12	na	na
I wanted to gain international experience and language skills	17.06***	na	8.26***	15-24 and 55+
I needed a job	9.38***	na	8.19***	15-24 and 55+
I wanted to travel or live abroad	6.32***	na	4.70**	none <sup>ψ</sup>
I had a desire to participate in volunteering as a way to reduce social or economic inequality	2.38	4.19**, <sup>ψ</sup>	na	na
I thought that the volunteer experience would give me skills useful in school or in a job	5.92***	na	38.35***	15-24 and 55+ 25-34 and 55+ 35-44 and 55+

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . <sup>ψ</sup> Tukey's or Games-Howell post-hoc test revealed significant differences between younger age groups but no significant difference from those 55 years or older. The Welch's test was used to indicate differences in samples denoted as having unequal variances (as identified by a statistically significant Levene's test). The abbreviation "na" indicates that the test is not applicable.

Volunteers were also asked to describe other motivations that did not fit well with predefined categories. Four main themes emerged. The most common response was to give back to others from a position of privilege and opportunity. One in five respondents specifically used the phrase “to give back”. A related motivation was the importance of sharing their “skills and years of experience” while traveling in the developing world. A third motivation that was emphasized by about one-third of respondents was to “learn about a new culture” but from a deep and relationship-oriented position that is uncommon with travel and tourism. While this could be paired within the category “to gain cross-cultural understanding”, respondents viewed this as sufficiently different enough to warrant separate expression. Lastly, one in five older volunteers mentioned some form of family connection that inspired them. These experiences included intergenerational volunteering with children, as well as volunteering with siblings. Tied to these familial references, it was important to respondents that they find a meaningful volunteer opportunity where both parties could participate and share in the experience.

### **Discussion**

A number of limitations constrain conclusions that can be drawn from this study. First, conclusions about motivations in later life are drawn from a sample of only 56 older international volunteers. In addition, the sample only includes volunteers serving with two secular IVCOs. Individual motivations for volunteering with different IVCOs could differ dramatically. For instance, national-level statistics suggests that more than half of older international volunteers serve with a religious organization (Lough, 2013). Because the sample includes only

participants in secular organizations, findings may not accurately represent motivations across the diversity of IVCOs. Although additional research utilizing large representative samples of older Americans would provide a better understanding of these populations—no such data on motivations are currently available.

Findings are somewhat consistent with, or at least do not contradict, previous studies on motivations of domestic volunteering by older adults. However, the top six motivations for volunteering abroad reflect expectations that cannot easily be met through domestic volunteering—including gaining cross-cultural understanding, traveling or living abroad, and acquiring international and language skills. Only one in six of the top motivations described by older adults in this study is wholly consistent with research on domestic volunteering: the desire to make a difference by helping others.

Although volunteering to remain productive or because they needed a job was listed as important by many older international volunteers in this study, it rated lower than previous research or theory might suggest. On the other hand, because more than half of the older adults in this study were more than ten years short of retirement age, it is possible that many had not yet experienced role loss and/or continued to consume immaterial products. In addition, older volunteers appear to spend less of their time volunteering abroad, with a more significant portion dedicated to domestic volunteering. As a result, many of their productivity needs may be met through domestic volunteering. Future research with a larger number of retired international volunteers may help to clarify the relative importance of the productivity motivation.

One area of potential divergence in this study is that international volunteers 55 years or older did not appear to place a

strong emphasis on volunteering to strengthen social relationships, which has previously been associated with socio-emotional selectivity predictors of volunteering among older adults (Hendricks & Cutler, 2004). While this study did not use Clary et al.'s, Volunteer Functions Inventory (1998), thereby limiting comparability, social factors were not rated particularly high and also did not feature heavily in open-ended comments. Although many older adults mentioned volunteering with family members, other potential social motives did not emerge as more important for older volunteers than younger volunteers. On the other hand, the friendship motive did emerge as more important for younger volunteers than older volunteers, as found previously (Dávila & Díaz-Morales, 2009).

Given that Okun et al., (2003) found the relationship between age and the friendship motivation is nonlinear, future research separating the older adult group into older and younger cohorts may reveal a difference. Volunteering to make friends and meet people was rated as slightly more important for volunteers aged 65 or older than for those aged 55 to 64 in this study (4.9 compared to 3.9 respectively). Although the size of the separate age groups was too small to test for statistical significance, differences would support Okun et al.'s hypothesis that friendship motivations follow changes in the life course and diminished opportunities for social integration that accompany older age and retirement (2003).

Consistent with all reviewed studies on older domestic volunteers, the career function was much lower for older international volunteers than for younger volunteers. A number of respondents explicitly stated that they were motivated to volunteer in order to go beyond tourism or vacationing that is common with

international travel. While volunteer tourism is a common criticism of volunteering by young people, many of these criticisms would be less relevant to older adults given higher skills and experience that are often associated with increased age (Palacios, 2010).

### **Implications for volunteer resource management**

In response to older adults' desire to make a difference by helping others, recruiting and marketing strategies for domestic volunteering by older adults often emphasize the meaningful and productive nature of volunteering (Einolf & Chambré, 2011). Because this motivation also ranks highly for older international volunteers, developing and highlighting productive and meaningful activities would help to recruit older volunteers. However, given that other top motivations appear to be unique to the international context, volunteer resource managers could increase engagement by older adults by also drawing on these egoistic motivations. However, given recent criticisms of "supply-based" or egoistically-driven volunteer placements (see Perold et al., 2013), IVCO should be cautious to design placements in a way that ensures a mutually positive impact on volunteers and host-communities.

IVCOs could also appeal to older adults by enhancing cultural exposure through organized direct contact and cooperation with local populations. Depending on the organization and the task at hand, IVCOs that devise tasks appealing to particular motives would likely attract a larger pool of potential volunteers. As one example of how these findings could inform task planning, a campaign focusing on social justice may be particularly appealing to older adults, as many indicated that they "desire to participate in volunteering as a



way to reduce social or economic inequality”.

Although motivations are important, a 2013 study of older adults engaged in “intensive volunteering” (where volunteers left their homes for at least two weeks to volunteer) found that, “Ability was a stronger determinant of serving than motivation, particularly in terms of health and finances” (Cheek, Piercy, & Grainger, 2013, p. 1). Assuming that this finding is relevant to the more specific pool of international volunteers, recruitment efforts may be more successful if IVCOs market health, access, and security protocol that match the ability functions of older adults, in addition to appealing to their motivations.

#### **Implications for future research**

Despite the growing number of older adults volunteering abroad, we know relatively little about the motivations of these volunteers. We echo Morrow-Howell’s assertion that: “Action in the civic engagement field is outstripping the developing knowledge base, and applied knowledge about volunteering in later life to guide program and policy initiatives has never been more important” (2010).

According to research on domestic volunteering, older adults typically demand greater incentives than younger people including, “the need for more training, more flexible and diverse options, and more opportunities for intergenerational volunteering”. Potential factors that prevent or promote volunteering abroad need to be investigated, for example, income, health, family patterns, employment, costs, and religious involvement. Findings suggest that intergenerational volunteering within the family may be a particularly useful incentive. This assumption is consistent with studies finding that older volunteers desire greater opportunities to work together with family members and young people

(Warburton et al., 2007). Additional research is needed to understand the dynamics of intergenerational volunteering among those who serve abroad.

As one of first studies to investigate the motivations of older international volunteers, we echo the conclusions that “nonprofit and public organizations [need to]...find ways to better utilize older Americans in formal volunteering” (Lee & Brudney, 2012, p. 179). The findings and recommendations emerging from this study are modest contributions to help bridge the current gap between senior volunteerism and its applied knowledge base. Findings can help stakeholders to more fully take advantage of volunteering abroad by older adults. This, in turn, will allow a greater number of older adults to be more productive in their later years by engaging in challenging and meaningful volunteer activities abroad for mutual benefit.

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