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VOLUNTEERISM AND LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG OLDER ADULTS

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Abstract

Quality of life, measured by scores on the Life Satisfaction Index-A, of 373 preretirees and retirees between the ages of 55 and 74 was analyzed to determine the independent contributions to life satisfaction of age, sex, retirement status, years of education, marital status and volunteer status. Persons donating their time and services through volunteer activities were found to be more satisfied with their lives than their nonvolunteering counterparts. Educational level was also positively related to life satisfaction. No other independent effects were observed. It was suggested that counsellors investigate potential therapeutic effects of volunteer activities.

Résumé

En vue de mesurer la qualité de la vie, on a analysé les réponses de 373 retraités et retraitées - leur âge varie de 55 à 74 ans - au questionnaire Life Satisfaction Index-A. Le but de la recherche était de mettre en évidence la contribution respective au score de qualité de la vie de variables comme l'âge, le sexe, le mode de retraite, les années de scolarité, le statut matrimonial et le volontariat. Les sujets offrant leur temps et leurs services par voie d'activités de volontariat se sont avérés plus satisfaits de leur vie que ceux qui n'étaient pas engagés dans le volontariat. Le niveau d'éducation est aussi relié de façon positive à la satisfaction dans la vie. On n'a observé aucun effet en rapport avec les autres variables indépendantes. On suggère aux conseillers de prendre en considération les effets thérapeutiques possibles d'activités basées sur le volontariat.

During the twentieth century, the age distribution of the Canadian population has been changing due to a consistent decrease in the death rate, a generally net positive immigration rate, and fluctuating fertility patterns. The result has been a population increasingly comprised of persons 65 years of age and older. No reversal of this trend has been projected until well into the 21st century (Denton & Spencer, 1980). Barring any substantial, unanticipated death-precipitating crises, it appears that an increased life span will become available to a

growing number of persons. Perhaps attention should now be focused on identifying variables which are related to the quality of life during this extended life span. While the ramifications of this age shift cut across numerous disciplinary boundaries (e.g., economics, politics, psychology, counselling, sociology and medicine), the focus of this investigation is on an element of life directly under the control of the individual - the donation of one's time and skills. Specifically, this study explores whether the voluntary donation of time and services among older adults (ages 55-74) is positively related to their self-reported quality of life.

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Various factors have been found to be associated with life satisfaction among the

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elderly. Perceived physical well-being has consistently been reported to be predictive of life satisfaction (Cutler, 1973; Edwards & Klemmack, 1973; Larson, 1978; Markides & Martin, 1979; Medley, 1976; Palmore & Kivett, 1977; Spreitzer & Snyder, 1974). Occupational prestige, socioeconomic status, income, perceived income, and education have also been shown to relate to life satisfaction (Edwards & Klemmack, 1973; Larson, 1978; Markides & Martin, 1979; Spreitzer & Snyder, 1974). Married elderly have reported themselves to be more satisfied with their lives than their widowed or divorced counterparts (Edwards & Klemmack, 1973; Hutchison, 1975).

Although attribute variables may be statistically related to reported life satisfaction, without further positing differential behavioural (as supported by Markides & Martin, 1979) and/or psychological outcomes, they explain little. For example, a greater income alone should not produce a greater degree of life satisfaction; however, with a greater income, there is an increase in the potential variety of activities which can be pursued.

From a therapeutic perspective, attribute variables are of little use; one can neither easily prescribe further education and improved health, nor proscribe widowhood. Rosow (1963) has suggested that an activity which is voluntarily continued is both meaningful and contributory to adjustment. Payne (1977) and Dye, Goodman, Roth, Bley, and Jensen (1973) further offered that the role of volunteer should maintain the individual's sense of identity and social roles, and should develop new roles through social interaction, communication, and the use of nonmaterial resources.

Activity and continuity theories would be supportive of the view that involvement is an ingredient of successful adaptation to the aging process. For the last several years, both formal and informal social activities have been found to relate to the elderly's satisfaction with life (Adams, 1971; Cutler, 1976; Edwards & Klemmack, 1973; Larson, 1978; Palmore & Kivett, 1977; Payne, 1977; Peppers, 1976; Ward, 1979). Several cautions have been expressed; the frequency of an activity has been reported to be less important to life satisfaction than the actual taking part in an informal friendship group (Lemon, Bengston, & Peterson, 1972), or than the quality of the interaction (Conner, Powers, & Bultena, 1979), while health may limit participation in a voluntary

association (Bull & Aucoin, 1975; Cutler, 1973).

Based on the cited research concerning the general role of social activities, and the specific nature of volunteer activities, it was the hypothesis of this investigation that, after controlling various attribute variables, volunteers would report a higher degree of satisfaction with life than would non-volunteers. If this be the case, professionals working with older adults might consider the appropriateness of suggesting volunteer activities for those expressing dissatisfaction with their current life situation.

Method

Instrument and Distribution

A questionnaire was used to obtain information concerning demographic variables, volunteer status, and life satisfaction. Demographic variables included age, sex, marital status, retirement status and years of education. A volunteer was defined as "someone who provides a service for which no money is received"; respondents indicated whether they currently served as a volunteer, or were not presently volunteering. The LSI-A (Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1961), as modified by Adams (1969) was selected to measure life satisfaction. This instrument is brief (18 items), easy to understand, self-administering, and frequently used. (Adams, 1969, 1971; Bull & Aucoin, 1975; Cutler, 1975; Edwards & Klemmack, 1973; Larson, 1978). While the standard format includes a "?" column to indicate an uncertain response, this was deleted to insure a directional response, and eliminate ambiguities identified by the elderly during pretesting. Items were scored as a "0", indicating a low life satisfaction response, or "1", indicative of high life satisfaction.

Both preretirees and retirees were sought as participants for this study. Personnel directors of major private and governmental employers were asked to randomly distribute the questionnaire to employees and their spouses between the ages of 55 and 64. A research assistant left questionnaires at membership meetings of senior citizens housing projects, recreation, clubs, and retired employee clubs, soliciting respondents between the ages of 65 and 74. Questionnaires were to be returned either directly through the mail, or indirectly through the employer/organization. Several students in

university courses also took questionnaires to their parents and grandparents.

Covering letters from the director of the sponsoring agency and the principal investigator were attached to each questionnaire. These letters served to apprise potential respondents of the general nature and purpose of the study, and to direct inquiries to the researchers. It was found helpful if employers of the preretired sample also attached a supportive covering memorandum.

Three events were used to increase public awareness: (1) a newsletter detailing the project was sent by the sponsoring agency to employers of prospective respondents; (2) an interview with the principal investigator was televised during the noon hour; and, (3) an early morning radio interview concerning the project was conducted.

Respondents

Of the 1,653 questionnaires distributed 373 were returned. Unfortunately, as the intermediaries (personnel officers and executive committees of retirees) did not return the non-distributed questionnaires, it was impossible to determine the rate of refusal.

Using existing demographic information (Province of Manitoba, 1976; Statistics Canada, 1978) an expected sample of 373 persons was statistically constructed, which would reflect the age and sex distribution of persons in the city between the ages of 55 and 74. The obtained sample of respondents who returned the questionnaire was quite similar, with only a minor over-representation of females (Table 1).

Table 1
Expected and Obtained Sample by Sex and Age

Age	Sex	
	Male	Female
55 - 64	102 (91)	122 (139)
65 - 74	70 (61)	79 (82)

Note: Obtained sample *n*'s are indicated by ().

Results

The range of scores on the LSI-A was from 0 to 18, with a mean of 12.81, standard deviation of 4.09, median of 13.75, and mode of 16.

This is indicative of a somewhat negative skew, with respondents reporting a generally positive evaluation of their current life situation.

Forward stepwise multiple regression was selected as the statistical approach to determine the independent contribution of the variables on the criterion variable, LSI-A (Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1973; Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, & Bent, 1975). On the first step, this procedure includes only the independent variable which most contributes to the variance of the criterion variable. The second step enters the variable which provides the next greatest contribution to the criterion variable, and analyzes the independent contribution of each of the two variables now included. This procedure may be repeated until all independent variables are included.

After discarding the results from two persons who responded with their age, rather than years of education, listwise deletion of missing values was employed, resulting in a final sample size of 323. The first variable entered was years of education, resulting in a multiple *R* of .2286 ($F(1,321) = 17.698, p < .01$).

At step 2, volunteer status was entered (multiple *R* = .2986, $F(2,320) = 15.665, p < .01$). The increase in the multiple R^2 from step 1 to step 2 was significant ($F(1,320) = 12.971, p < .01$).

Step 3 included the marital status of widow, yielding a significant multiple *R* of .3346 ($F(3,319) = 13.404, p < .01$). The increase in multiple R^2 from step 2 to step 3 was again significant ($F(1,319) = 8.180, p < .01$).

Steps 4 through 8 sequentially added the variables of sex, age, retirement status, single and married. Although the multiple *R* remained significant for each of these steps, with an *F* at step 8 ($8,314) = 5.42 (p < .01)$, the increase in multiple R^2 for any step failed to reach statistical significance with the stepwise singular addition of any variable, or all five variables simultaneously added ($F(5,314) = .6695, p > .05$).

At this point, the reader might be tempted to conclude that years of education, volunteer status and widowhood are the significant contributors to the variance in life satisfaction scores. However, after all independent variables have been entered, the only statistically significant independent contributors to life satisfaction are years of education and volunteer status (Table 2).

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Table 2

Beta Weights at Final Step of Regression		
Variable	Beta Weight	F
Years of Education	.1815	10.097*
Volunteer Status (0=nonvolunteer; 1=volunteer)	.1809	10.720*
Widowed (0=nonwidowed; 1=widowed)	-.1079	1.034
Sex (0=female; 1=male)	.0850	1.829
Age	-.0596	.617
Retirement Status (0=working; 1=retired)	.0367	.225
Single (0=not single; 1=single)	-.0183	.042
Married (0=not married; 1=married)	.0127	.011

*p (1, 314) < .01

Discussion

The use of a multiple linear regression approach permits the simultaneous examination of independent effects of several variables, and is a procedure frequently utilized in the examination of life satisfaction among the elderly. The results of the current investigation are consistent with previous reports that life satisfaction among older adults is unrelated to age (Edwards & Klemmack, 1973), sex (Edwards & Klemmack, 1973; Palmore & Kivett, 1977) or retirement status (Larson, 1978). It is likely that investigations to the contrary, for example, Spreitzer and Snyder's (1974) finding that above the age of 64 men are happier than women, have failed to adequately control age-related intervening variables such as health, widowhood, and education.

Previous findings regarding the relationship between marital status and life satisfaction have been equivocal. When comparing elderly at poverty and low income levels, Hutchison (1975) found that among low income elderly, widowhood was associated with a lowered life satisfaction; no such relationship was found for elderly with incomes below the poverty level. Similarly, Larson (1978) contended that when marital status effects on life satisfaction have been reported, married and single persons have fared better than widowed or divorced elderly. In contrast, Edwards and Klemmack (1973) concluded that, after controlling socioeconomic variables, marital status was unrelated to life satisfaction. The results of the current investigation support the latter position. While Socioeconomic Status was not directly assessed, years of education might be considered a proxy; no individual marital status independently contributed to the variance in life satisfaction scores. It can be concluded, therefore, that while it first appears that widows may be less satisfied with their lives, when the confounding contributions of sex, education, age,

retirement status and volunteer status are removed, marital status itself is not significantly related to life satisfaction.

In the present investigation, education was found to independently contribute to satisfaction with life. While Markides and Martin (1979) also reached a similar conclusion for males, no such result was reported for females. Their suggested interpretation was that men with higher education levels might have more satisfying occupations than men with lower education levels, while higher education was not as important for women who did not have an "occupational career". Unfortunately, Markides and Martin (1979) neither presented nor analyzed career information, and the sample was restricted to persons residing in low income census tracts. Perhaps the expanded range of educational level of respondents in the current investigation permitted the effects of education to become manifest. While in the Markides and Martin (1979) study only 21.6 percent of the males and 26.7 percent of the females had 12 or more years of education, in the current study 43.7 percent of the males and 40.4 percent of the females had 12 or more years of education. Given that Markides and Martin (1979) found no independent relation between income and satisfaction with life, it is plausible that education offers an expansion of opportunities for enjoying life which are independent of one's career (or income); thus, no differences between the sexes should be expected, irrespective of paid employment.

The second independent contributor to life satisfaction was volunteer status. Volunteers were more satisfied with their lives than non-volunteers. Several explanations are possible, and a precise determination requires further empirical investigation. Perhaps by volunteering one becomes more active, and it is the activity rather than the voluntary aspect which is crucial; such an interpretation is supported by Lemon, Bengston, and Peterson (1972) and Markides and Martin (1979). It is also possible that only those with an initially high life satisfaction serve as volunteers. Clarification of this issue must arise from longitudinal investigations which control baseline levels of satisfaction. A third interpretation is that through volunteering, life satisfaction increases. As Rosow (1963) posited, voluntarily continued activities contribute to adjustment. Through the act of volunteering, behaviour acquires or expresses a meaning, eventuating in satisfaction.

It is apparent that further research is

needed to interpret the value and meaning of volunteer activities, control for additional variables (race, income, health, etc.), extend the age range to both younger and older persons, and determine whether a cause-effect relation exists between volunteering and life satisfaction. Until such time, counsellors might advise their clients that, among older adults, volunteer activity is associated with a higher life satisfaction, and so prescribe. Professional counsellors are in an ideal position to empirically investigate whether such voluntary actions actually may exert a therapeutic effect on their elderly clients.

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