Communication, Volunteering, and Aging: A Research Agenda

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Americans' annual volunteer service totals over 8 billion hours and is estimated to be worth more than 100 billion dollars. Older adults perform much of this work, and being a volunteer has been identified as a predictor of successful aging. Despite its prevalence and importance in this demographic group, volunteering remains understudied in the field of communication. This theoretical article integrates work from various disciplines to examine the topics of volunteering and successful aging through a communication lens. After defining volunteering, we systematically outline how communication can inform the study of volunteering. We then briefly highlight potential determinants and motivations for older adults' volunteering and examine the link between volunteering and successful aging, arguing that many of the documented benefits of volunteering may in fact result from the *communicative* opportunities it affords. Finally, we outline an agenda for future research on communication, successful aging, and volunteering.

About 62.8 million people participated in a volunteer activity for or through an organization in the United States between September 2009 and September 2010 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). Of the six age groups surveyed by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), older adults spent the most time volunteering in 2010, and nearly 40% of those older adults reported volunteering between 100 and 500 hours per year. Volunteering has also been cited as a predictor of successful aging for older adults (Pruchno, Wilson-Genderson, Rose, & Cartwright, 2010). However, despite the prevalence and importance of volunteering in this demographic, it remains understudied by scholars of communication and aging, and in the field of communication more generally. Given the number of individual volunteers, the considerable financial and material contribution this work represents, and these activities' potential role in successful aging, we believe it is important to understand how communication both during and about individuals' volunteering efforts affects their experiences and related outcomes.

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Date submitted: 2012–08–18

Although volunteering has received increasing attention in recent years, as evidenced by Kramer, Gossett, and Lewis' (2013) recent book, Ganesh and McAllum's (2009) work on discourses of volunteerism, and articles by Kramer (2005, 2011) in prominent communication journals, the vast majority of work on the topic still comes from other disciplines. In a recent review of theoretical work on volunteering, Hustinx, Cnaan, and Handy (2010) identified four fields as major contributors to the literature: economics, sociology, psychology, and political science, each of which addresses different aspects of volunteering. Economics focuses primarily on its costs and benefits, sociology studies volunteers as part of a social system, psychology is interested in the nature of this pro-social behavior and personality variables distinguishing volunteers from non-volunteers, and political science is concerned with issues of active civic society and democracy implicated in volunteering. In terms of empirical focus, much of the extant empirical work on volunteering draws on data from large-scale national surveys. As such, this research offers considerable insight into the activities, demographics, reported motivations, and perceived benefits of volunteering but says much less about the social and communicative processes these activities entail. We will argue that communication may actually be one of the key factors responsible for findings of research in other disciplines that did not, however, study communicative variables.

This article integrates work from these various disciplines and examines volunteering by older adults, particularly as it relates to successful aging, through a communication lens. After first defining volunteering, we will systematically outline how communication can inform the study of volunteering. We will briefly highlight potential determinants and motivations for older adults' volunteering and then examine the link between volunteering and successful aging, arguing that many of the documented benefits of volunteering may in fact result from the *communicative* opportunities that it affords. Finally, in light of the foregoing, we will outline an agenda for future research on communication, successful aging, and volunteering.

Defining Volunteering

Before addressing the role of communication in the study and practice of volunteering, we must circumscribe our area of inquiry and thus establish what it means to be a volunteer. A multidisciplinary review of the literature on volunteering indicates a general scholarly consensus that a definition of *volunteering* should include the non-obligatory nature of the act, the lack of (financial) reward for it, and the notion that the actions in question benefit others (e.g., Cnaan, Hardy, & Wadsworth, 1996; Handy et al., 2000; Smith, 1981; Snyder & Omoto, 2008). Beyond this, however, the importance of additional characteristics in defining volunteering is debated. Some researchers distinguish between *formal volunteering* through an organization (e.g., working at a homeless shelter; see Tompkins, 2009) and *informal volunteering* that does not involve an organization (e.g., picking up trash along a local walking trail with neighbors). Other scholarly definitions specify that volunteering activity is productive or accomplishes some end (Smith, 1981; Wilson & Musick, 1998), and/or addresses some community or individual need (e.g., National Association of Counties, 1990).

Most of the empirical and theoretical work on volunteering to date (including that cited above) treats the topic from a relatively individualistic, Western perspective (Ganesh & McAllum, 2009). Volunteers typically help people from a social group (along dimensions such as socioeconomic status)

other than their own, so the notion of an "other" or outgroup is implicit, if not explicit, in the construct of volunteering (Ganesh & McAllum, 2009). However, some cultures lack a word or even a concept for volunteering; instead, helping or working for others in the community, for example, is simply regarded as part of membership or citizenship in that community.

Variations in the conceptualization of volunteering raise the question of how much individuals' self-definition matters in defining volunteering. If a person performs an act that meets the objective criteria outlined above but does not subjectively consider it volunteering, does this still constitute volunteering? For many volunteers, membership in a volunteer organization is relatively fluid and adapts to changing life circumstances (Kramer, 2011). Thus, individuals not actively participating in volunteer activities at a given time may still consider themselves volunteers, just on temporary leave.

As the foregoing implies, the nature of the act of volunteering varies considerably in both form and context. As volunteers, people may work in groups or individually, within large or small organizations, or outside of any organization. Volunteer commitment may be short- or long-term, ranging from an hour of one's time to years of one's life. In some cases, volunteering is intimately connected to other personal or professional activities—for example, working for a religious organization of which one is a member—whereas in others, it is a separate activity or enterprise. Despite the range of manifestations of the construct of volunteering, we believe all volunteer experiences share a core set of features—such acts are non-obligatory, are performed without expectation of compensation, and benefit others—and that communication plays a key role in these experiences.

Communication and Volunteering

Although considerable research has covered the topic of volunteering across disciplines, very little has addressed the communication inherent in and implicated by participation in volunteer activity. None of the theories of volunteering recently reviewed by Hustinx et al. (2010) had communication as a central or key construct. Communication is implicit in some parts of established models of volunteering, such as Omoto and Snyder's (2002) volunteer process model, which outlines antecedents, experiences, and consequences of volunteering at the levels of the individual, the agency, and the social system. Arguably, elements like volunteer recruitment, training, social climate, and social network are highly communicative in nature. However, the role of communication in the volunteer experience is conspicuously absent from their theorization. Similarly, Haski-Leventhal and Bargal's (2008) volunteer stages and transition model outlines five phases, four transitions, and two kinds of turnover in the volunteer experience but does not explicitly reference or discuss that communication that is implicit in many of its components.

Kramer's (2005, 2011) work on socialization and membership in voluntary groups is a notable exception, in that his recent model of socialization of voluntary members focuses on the use of different kinds of communication (tailored to role development, reconnaissance, and recruitment) in encouraging individuals to join a volunteer organization, and on communication's role in socializing those who have decided to become members. However, his model focuses specifically on socialization processes. These are certainly important, but they represent only one of many ways that communication is relevant to the volunteer experience.

In what follows, we outline the various points in the volunteering process where communication plays a role and therefore could—indeed, should—be the subject of systematic empirical study. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate that communication is an important and heretofore overlooked construct in the understanding of many empirical findings related to volunteering, discussed in greater detail below. We propose that communication may mediate important relationships in the volunteering process that are themselves often communicative in nature.

First, as Kramer's (2005, 2011) socialization model aptly outlines, communication is a critical aspect of recruiting volunteers. It affects the ways individuals come to learn about a volunteer opportunity, as well as the recruitment process more generally. New volunteers may be recruited via formal channels such as advertising or booths at volunteer fairs, as well as through more informal channels, such as word of mouth among family, friends, or colleagues (e.g., Independent Sector, 2000).

As Kramer's (2011) model describes, communication also has an important role to play in socializing volunteers who have decided to join a volunteer organization or simply participate in a volunteer activity for a day. Such communication includes explanations or implicit messages about "how we do things here," what kinds of behaviors are or are not considered appropriate, and how volunteers see their role in the organization and the community (e.g., Tompkins, 2009).

Second, the act of volunteering itself often—although not always—consists of an exchange of messages between the volunteer and the recipient of the volunteering action. Because of the highly varied nature of volunteering, we define "recipient" broadly. In the case of person-to-person help, the recipient is another individual; in the case of individuals who volunteer their time to a cause or organization (e.g., reserve police officer, fundraiser, local youth sports team coach), both the organization and the population it serves may be seen as recipients.

The messages exchanged may be implicit or explicit. In person-to-person helping, communication may consist of interaction and conversation in the traditional sense, and underlying messages can relate to autonomy and dependency, or to status relations between groups—who is on top, who is not, and who is both in need and "worthy" of help. When the "recipient" of volunteering is not a person but an organization or a collective good (as in, say, a beach or trail cleanup), a volunteer's actions may be seen as sending messages to society about the importance and value of the organization or good in question.

Third, volunteering often—though again, not always—provides opportunities for communication between volunteers. As will be discussed further below, one of the primary reasons individuals cite for engaging in volunteering, and by extension one of the benefits they derive from it, is opportunities to communicate with more and/or new people, expanding the volunteer's social network (Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996). This may be particularly important for older adults as they disconnect from professional networks in retirement and/or lose friends.

Fourth, volunteering gives participants opportunities to communicate about their volunteering efforts to both known and unknown others. Because of the value society typically attributes to volunteering, responses to talk of volunteering are generally likely to be more positive than responses to

discourse about other topics (for an exception, see Omoto and Snyder, 2002). Talking about one's volunteer experience thus may be a way to gain favor, approval, or influence (all benefits). Insofar as volunteering allows people to develop new skills, knowledge, and experience, it also gives them the chance to discuss and share this knowledge and experience—which may be seen as novel, interesting, or exciting—with others, possibly accruing additional social advantages.

Fifth, larger social and cultural institutions send messages to individuals about the nature and value of volunteering. Typically, Western society characterizes volunteering as positive, valued, and appreciated. Institutions like service-learning programs convey this message formally through the educational system. Less formally, these messages are communicated though recognition of volunteers' efforts and the language in media coverage of volunteering.

Lastly, when volunteering involves an organization (i.e., formal volunteering), volunteers' experiences involve several additional potential communicative elements. The organization may communicate to the public about their mission and activities. Formal volunteering settings may also entail communicative exchanges between the organization and prospective members (Kramer's [2011] role development, reconnaissance and recruitment communication), as well as (communicative) support provided to current members of a volunteer organization. Messages may also be sent to past (or transitory) members, apprising them of the organization's activities and/or encouraging them to get involved again.

As this inventory makes clear, volunteering is an inherently communicative phenomenon. The amount and relative importance of communication in different aspects of the volunteering process will, of course, vary with the nature of the activity in question (e.g., communication with targets of volunteering efforts is obviously more relevant to activities that involve interaction with people than to those that do not), but it is clear that communication is involved in all volunteers' experiences. Each area outlined above is a potential area of inquiry in its own right, with a suite of attendant research questions (discussed further below).

Older Adults as Volunteers

As mentioned at the outset, older adults have been the most active demographic in the United States in terms of volunteering (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). Who are these volunteers, and what motivates them? One widely cited determinant of volunteer activity is the volunteer's socioeconomic status. Tang (2008) found that education was positively associated with older people's likelihood of volunteering, the number of hours spent volunteering, and the number of organizations volunteered at; however, income did not affect these three factors of volunteer service.

Contextual factors can also be important determinants of volunteering. Burr, Choi, Mutchler, and Caro (2005) found that those who engaged in informal caregiving (i.e., helping friends or relatives who are unable to care for themselves) were more likely to be volunteers and to spend more hours volunteering during the year. They suggested that these findings might be due to the circumstances of caregivers, who were more likely to be embedded in social networks that provide them with opportunities

to volunteer. In a study of 11 European nations, Hank and Erlinghagen (2009) found that higher degrees of civil liberty and greater government social spending as a percentage of GDP are associated with higher rates of volunteering by older adults. They suggested that countries with these characteristics do a better job at establishing stable "opportunity structures" for older adult volunteers.

Hank and Erlinghagen (2009) also found that family culture impacted rates of volunteering. Rates of volunteering were lower in countries with high levels of informal social contact (such as through families), suggesting that this activity may "crowd out" volunteering in people's lives. This could be seen as displacement of both time and benefits: spending more time on such informal social contact reduces the number of hours available for people to engage in other activities such as volunteering, but in such cultures, family members are more likely to take up many of the functions or services that volunteers fulfill or provide in more individualistic cultures. Here again, it is worth noting that definitions and conceptualizations of volunteering may vary cross-culturally, with individualism/collectivism as a potentially relevant dimension for understanding differences (Eckstein, 2001; Finkelstein, 2011; Kemmelmeir, Jambor, & Letner, 2006).

Finally—and perhaps unsurprisingly—being asked to volunteer by another individual significantly increases the likelihood that an adult will volunteer. Those who were asked to volunteer were 71% more likely to actually follow through than those who were not asked (Independent Sector, 2000). This factor may be especially important in determining participation by older adults, who are often less connected to traditional educational and work institutions than younger people are (Morrow-Howell, 2010).

In addition to studying the demographic determinants of volunteering, researchers have also examined what motivates older adults to volunteer. A common theoretical approach to this issue is the *functional* approach, which categorizes volunteers' motivations and the psychological functions served by their actions. Six primary categories of motivation have been identified and validated (e.g., in Clary et al., 1996): *personal values* (e.g., feeling it is important to help others), *career* (e.g., making contacts with potential to advance one's career), *esteem enhancement* (i.e., feeling needed), *social concerns* (i.e., volunteering being important to people the volunteer respects), *protection* (i.e., addressing one's own issues or concerns), and *understanding* (e.g., gaining a new perspective or new knowledge or skills) (Clary et al., 1998). Compared to other age groups, older adults were generally more motivated by feelings of community obligation and service to society, whereas younger adults were typically more concerned with career, understanding, and protective motivations (Omoto, Snyder, & Martino, 2000).

Issues of identity and social connections are also key considerations in understanding what motivates older volunteers to both take up and persist in volunteer activity. Beyond the six functions identified by Clary et al. (1996), another motivation for volunteering is meeting new people (Omoto & Snyder, 2002, 2010). This highlights the importance of the new opportunities for communication that volunteering offers older adults. In some cases, these new opportunities mean having new or different people to communicate with (thereby expanding a volunteer's social network). Certain kinds of volunteering may provide occasions for developing meaningful relationships with recipients of volunteering activity (e.g., regular patrons of a homeless shelter; Tompkins, 2009). A direct result of volunteers'

actions is that recipients of volunteers' time and effort generally experience a range of benefits (e.g., services and companionship) that often are conferred through and mediated by communication.

In other cases, these new opportunities mean having new topics, experiences, knowledge or skills to talk about with others. As older adults retire and subsequently disengage from their professional networks, pursuing new social avenues becomes a means of staying connected to other people and the community more broadly, a factor associated with successful aging (e.g., Giles, Glonek, Luszcz, & Andrews, 2005). Additionally, volunteering can be a way for older adults to show that they are still productive and contributing to society, defying stereotypes of older adults as dependent or incompetent. Talking to family and friends about one's volunteer efforts may be one way to accomplish this.

Being a volunteer is also an important part of many people's personal and social identities (see Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This has both psychological and practical implications: across age groups, those who identify more strongly with their volunteer role have been shown to donate more time, more money, and more blood, to express stronger intentions to continue service, and to exhibit greater persistence in volunteer tasks (Omoto & Snyder, 2002). To the extent that one's identity and sense of self are shaped by interactions with others—who categorize, label, and respond to oneself—communication both within and about volunteering activities is an important factor in cultivating an individual's identity.

Interaction between individuals' volunteering activity and other aspects of their lives, particularly their social network, may also affect volunteer activity. For example, being a volunteer (or being known as someone who volunteers) may cause an individual to be viewed favorably by others, which may reinforce the value of volunteer activity and increase motivation to persist in volunteering activities. However, under certain circumstances, the reverse may be true: Omoto and Snyder (2002) found that for volunteers working with people with AIDS, longevity in a volunteer position was *inversely* related to reported social support. This finding highlights that the level and nature of communicative support one receives can influence motivation and participation, and also suggests that just as volunteers can experience virtue by association (with their volunteer organization or cause), they may also experience stigma by association (see Le Poire, Giles, & Prescott, 2004). This is foreseeable in less extreme circumstances as well: older adults volunteering in police or government agencies, for example, could face denigration by people with libertarian or anti-authority tendencies. Similarly, strident Democrats may disparage volunteers in the (American) Tea Party movement. Accordingly, it would be interesting to determine why, how and to whom people disclose and account for particular kinds of their volunteer activities.

In short, older adults who are better educated, more socially supported, and more connected are generally more likely to volunteer. Older adults also are often motivated by a sense of community obligation and service to society, and the potential communicative and social benefits of volunteering—discussed further below—may also be important factors motivating volunteers. Interestingly, these findings indicate the potential for a "rich-get-richer" effect: better-connected older adults may be presented with more opportunities to volunteer, meaning they may disproportionately benefit from the positive outcomes of volunteering, including strengthened social networks (see below).

Volunteering and Successful Aging

As discussed at the outset, research has identified volunteering as a predictor of successful aging (Pruchno et al., 2010), defined as a "highly individualized and subjective concept . . . recognized when an older individual is able to achieve desired goals with dignity and as independently as possible" (Bieman-Copland, Ryan, & Cassano, 1998, pp. 144–145). Typically associated with life satisfaction in one's later years, successful aging often includes features such as taking pleasure from everyday activities, regarding life as meaningful, feeling successful in achieving one's goals, holding a positive self-image, and maintaining an optimistic outlook (Giles, Davis, Gasiorek, & Giles, 2013). As a group, older adults are seen as potentially suffering from social identity threats, given Western culture's stereotypically negative conception of aging as a process and an outcome. We propose that volunteering and its attendant communicative opportunities provide older adults with a means to challenge those stereotypes (e.g., Bowen & Skirbekk, 2013), as well as benefit more generally.

Volunteering has well-documented positive outcomes for volunteers. First, and perhaps most simply, across age groups, people generally report feeling good about their volunteering efforts. Morrow-Howell, Hong, and Tang (2009) surveyed elderly volunteers and found that more than 80% of them reported being either somewhat or a great deal better off (in their estimation) because of their volunteer experience. Additionally, nearly all the participants agreed that their experience volunteering had improved their life in some way. Likewise, in a study of elderly Hong Kong Chinese volunteers, Chong, Rochelle, and Liu (2013) recently found that volunteer work was associated with good health, productive engagement in the community, and engagement with significant others' lives. Inasmuch as these positive feelings about volunteering contribute to taking pleasure in everyday activities, holding a positive self-image, and maintaining an optimistic outlook on life, they may also contribute to older adults' life satisfaction and successful aging.

However, and interestingly, the relationship between volunteering and benefits is not necessarily linear. Benefits increase with the amount of volunteering up a point, but evidence points to an optimal level of volunteering beyond which individuals do not reap additional benefit (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003; Windsor, Anstey, & Rodgers, 2008). In a study of older adults in Australia, researchers found support for an inverted U-shaped relationship between volunteering and psychological well-being, with moderate levels of volunteering associated with the highest levels of reported well-being. Individuals at the highest level of volunteer activity reported both lower levels of well-being and higher levels of negative affect. This study suggested that the optimal level of volunteer activity, in terms of well-being scores, was between 100 and 800 hours annually (Windsor et al., 2008), which translates to roughly 2 to 15 hours per week. Meanwhile, the researchers also observed benefits, in terms of well-being, for adults who participated in low levels of volunteering. Merely occupying the role of a volunteer—or being seen to live it, which may include communicating that role to the world—appears to be related to well-being.

In addition to its general positive effect on volunteers' sense of well-being (see Okun, Rios, Crawford, & Levy, 2011), volunteering has also been shown to have a positive effect on mental health (e.g., Li, Chen, & Chen, 2013). One recent study found increased levels of depression over time among

older adults who did not volunteer, whereas those who volunteered showed a general decrease in depression, indicating that volunteering may counteract the effects of naturally rising depression levels in aging adults (Kim & Pai, 2010). Moreover, the more an older adult volunteered, the greater the beneficial effect of volunteering on his or her depression level. Compared to same-age non-volunteers, older volunteers also showed a faster rate of decline in reported depression, controlling for socioeconomic characteristics and individual demographic factors (Kim & Pai, 2010). It should be noted that not all volunteer experiences have these effects (e.g., Rook & Sorkin, 2003), but many do (e.g., Li et al., 2013). Generally, depression and successful aging are negatively associated (e.g., Depp & Jeste, 2006), so attenuating depression may contribute to successful aging and related well-being.

Beyond benefits to mental health, compelling correlations have been found between volunteering and delayed mortality (Harris & Thoresen, 2005). Whether volunteering is actually responsible for delayed mortality, or whether a third (likely social) variable explains this association has not been definitively established. Regardless, this intriguing connection merits further study.

We argue that the life circumstances of older adults may uniquely position them to benefit from volunteer work. With aging, their children's reaching adulthood, retirement, or loss of a loved one, older adults often must cope with changes in role identity due to no longer being active parents on a day-to-day basis, working professionals, or part of a romantic partnership. In some cases, the nature and form of role identities shift over time—for example, parents remain involved in their children's lives, though in different forms and capacities, after those children leave home. However, when older adults feel they have lost an important part of their identity, negative consequences can ensue: role-identity absences have been associated with lower levels of reported well-being (Greenfield & Marks, 2004). Volunteering has been shown to protect against this declining well-being by providing older adults with a new role identity—that of a volunteer—and with it, increases in reported positive affect as well as opportunities to express it.

Considering the loss of professional role identity specifically, retirement entails more than dealing with the loss of the identity role as a working adult (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004). First, older adults must adjust to the loss of both their work and, all too often, the social ties associated with it; second, they must develop a new, post-retirement lifestyle they find satisfactory (Van Solinge & Henkens, 2008). At this point, older adults' non-worker identities—including that of volunteer—may function as a bridge between pre-retirement and retirement life stages. Indeed, volunteer work prior to retirement has been found to facilitate adjustment to retirement, while participation in leisure activities had no effect (Van Solinge & Henkens, 2008). Older adults may also see and communicate their volunteer work as an opportunity to "give back" and "make a difference" to the community at a time of life when they have the time, resources, and position to do so. One poignant example of this is the cleanup efforts of older engineers and plant workers following the recent post-earthquake nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan. Rationalizing that the long-term consequences of radiation exposure were less problematic for them (because they have fewer years left to live), hundreds stepped up and volunteered for work that others did not want to do (Buerk, 2011).

Many people appear to consider volunteering a natural "fit" for retirement. As retired individuals gain a large amount of free time from having discontinued their role as working adults, it seems logical to

fill that time with activities such as volunteering. In one study of perceptions of volunteering and retirement, almost 60% of adults aged 50–64 rated volunteering as part of an ideal retirement lifestyle, and those who were already volunteering were more likely to rate it as such. However, and interestingly, adults who were within five years of retirement were less likely to consider volunteering part of an ideal retirement lifestyle, suggesting that lifespan position influences one's perceptions of volunteering as it relates to retirement (Smith, 2004).

Two hypotheses about the relationship between retirement and volunteering have been empirically tested. One, the substitution argument, proposes that volunteer activity will increase after retirement because of the decrease in time consumed by working. Some evidence for this hypothesis has been found (e.g., Dosman, Fast, Chapman, & Keating, 2006), though differences in volunteering hours between the pre- and post-retirement groups were often small. The second hypothesis presents volunteer activity and paid work as complementary and positively associated, because paid work is associated with a broader social network and, thus, more potential opportunities to volunteer. This hypothesis predicts a decrease in volunteer activity after retirement because of a shrinking social network, decrease in interest in volunteering, and changes in evaluation of opportunities. It is supported primarily by cross-sectional data, and limited support for its predictions has also been found using longitudinal data (Mutchler, Burr, & Caro, 2003). To date, neither hypothesis has been definitively disproven. Overall, the best predictor of volunteer involvement in retirement has been found to be past volunteer involvement (Mutchler et al., 2003; Piliavin, 2010).

Studies on the loss of partner role-identity (i.e., widowhood) in relation to volunteering have had mixed results. Some found no significant relationship between widowhood and formal or informal volunteering (e.g., Donnelly & Hinterlong, 2009), but other studies did find effects related to volunteer activity. Li (2007) found that recently widowed older adults were almost 50% more likely to volunteer than their still-married counterparts (though those widowed for more than 4 years showed no increase in likelihood). Volunteer participation following spousal loss also had positive effects on mental health. The study found that volunteering worked as a buffer from stress and depressive symptoms in widowed adults. Adults who had high levels of volunteer participation before becoming widowed coped better with depressive symptoms following spousal loss than those who had not volunteered previously.

Finally, being a volunteer was also found to protect against the negative effect that major role-identity absences have on participants' sense of purpose in life (Greenfield & Marks, 2004)—a factor in life satisfaction and successful aging (e.g., Reker, 2001). In addition, older folk who volunteer may find that communicating about their socially altruistic activities stimulates support from family and/or social networks, (communicatively) facilitating another path toward psychological well-being. As noted above, volunteer experiences may also be new and newsworthy topics for conversation with people in older adults' social networks, as well as a means for older adults to defy negative stereotypes of their age group (e.g., Bowen & Skirbekk, 2013).

Communication, Volunteering, and Aging: A Research Agenda

As the foregoing attests, volunteering gives older adults a way to demonstrate that they are still productive and contributing to society. Engagement in these experiences also provides older volunteers with a host of benefits. We argue that it is communication that may in fact be driving many of these benefits. The extent of communication's impact is an empirical question; however, almost no research concerns this topic at present. Much of the work to date on volunteering has been done with large-scale, national data sets (often many years old) that lack questions relating to communicative variables. Thus, there is a need for new research and new studies on the subject of volunteering that explicitly incorporate communication into their frameworks. This is a tremendous opportunity for communication scholars to contribute to an important and growing field.

Hoping to foster and promote such research, we conclude this article with a research agenda for the study of communication, volunteering, and successful aging. This agenda, which adopts a Western conceptualization of volunteering, follows the structure of our delineation (above) of how communication is implicated in different aspects of the process of volunteering.

Recruitment

Recruitment, among many other topics, should prompt study of the channels, content, and types of messages used to recruit new volunteers, with the goal of understanding what is most effective. What message features are best for recruiting older adults as volunteers? What values should these messages appeal to? If such messages come through formal channels, what format is most effective for recruitment? How do messages communicated through informal channels (e.g., social networks) compare in effectiveness to those that come through formal channels? What are the best ways to reach older adults, whose life circumstances often render them more socially isolated?

Socialization

Socialization is an inherently communicative process. Kramer's (e.g., 2011) and Tompkins' (2009) work provide insightful (auto-ethnographic) accounts of how new volunteers are socialized into two quite different organizations (a community choir and a homeless shelter, respectively), but these are just two examples of the many forms that the process, and the research addressing it, could take. Other possible questions are also of interest: How do experiences differ among people who receive formal versus informal training? How much are socialization efforts in a given organization tailored to an older adult audience (cf. Chinn & Barbour, 2013)? How does the extent to which older adults feel their needs are being met in the socialization process affect their identification with the volunteer organization, and/or their identities as volunteers?

Communication with Targets of Volunteering

When the act of volunteering involves interaction with the recipients of the volunteer efforts, the nature of the ensuing communication may be an important determinant of volunteers' perception of the

value and quality of their efforts. This, in turn, is likely to be a significant mediator of the degree and quality of potential benefits for both volunteers and recipients of volunteering activity. As discussed above, volunteering can provide opportunities for development of mutually beneficial and enriching relationships between volunteers and targets, and communication is central to the nature and quality of these relationships. What qualities of interaction correlate with high levels of satisfaction or positive affect for older adult volunteers? In what interactional situation is a volunteer's age considered salient or relevant? When it is salient, how do older adults address issues of age in their interactions with targets of their volunteer efforts, particularly when those targets are themselves older adults?

Communication with Other Volunteers

Many volunteer efforts afford volunteers the opportunity to meet and get to know fellow volunteers, thereby making new contacts and extending their social networks. We propose that, insofar as older adults become more isolated as they age, social connections made through volunteering may be beneficial and correlate with successful aging. As noted above, the nature of communication with fellow volunteers can be another important determinant of volunteers' experiences and, by extension, of the benefits they do (or do not) reap. It would also be interesting to consider how volunteers manage social contrasts. For instance, having (or, in the case of retirees, having had) a high-power or high-status occupation and then having to accommodate—and be seen accommodating to—menial tasks with volunteer "peers" who may come from more modest backgrounds has the potential to be challenging. How do older volunteers navigate this, and how does doing so affect their experiences as volunteers? Communication models of acculturation and adaptive transformation (e.g., Giles, Bonilla, & Speer, 2012; Kim, 2001) may be of theoretical interest in this regard.

Communication with Others About Volunteering

We have suggested that volunteering often provides older adults with both new and newsworthy topics of conversation (i.e., their volunteer experiences) with others, as well as opportunities to communicatively advertise their status as a volunteer, an identity typically lauded by Western society. The nature of these interactions should be tested empirically, particularly as they relate to reported benefits of volunteering and successful aging: Do older adults who share their experiences with their social networks experience greater benefits or satisfaction from their volunteering? Do older adults who communicate about their identity as volunteers—particularly as it relates to stereotypes of decline—perceive themselves differently? The nature of the communication with others, that is, how one presents or communicatively constructs one's experience of volunteering (e.g., invoking the label of "volunteer" versus "docent"; talking about experiences versus benefits) is also an interesting area of inquiry in which issues of identification and perhaps culture may be relevant.

Communication by Institutions on the Value of Volunteering

Formally and informally, educational and cultural institutions in the United States characterize volunteering as positive and valued by society. In this respect, it would be interesting to consider how individuals' institutional affiliations—and related socialization into the idea of service—relate to their

volunteer activity and the value they attach to that activity. Also worth investigating is how, and at what point in the lifespan, individuals receive key institutional messages about service, and from what sources (e.g., a service-learning experience or work done through one's church), particularly to the extent that such messages correlate with volunteering experiences later in life. Finally, the potential cross-cultural differences in institutional messages about volunteering form an area ripe for empirical scrutiny. How do institutional messages about the value of volunteering or service differ between individualistic and collectivistic cultures? How is "volunteering" viewed and discussed at an institutional level in cultures where helping others is simply an aspect of membership in that community?

Volunteering as a Unique Context

An astute reader might observe—and object—that many of the communicative processes and phenomena outlined here, particularly interactions in organizational contexts, could apply to many aspects of life. We acknowledge that much of what we discuss here is not exclusive to the situation of volunteer experience. Given the paucity of (even descriptive) data on communication in the context of volunteering, we believe it is premature at this stage to speculate about what might be unique about volunteering in terms of communication.

However, certain aspects of the volunteering process in situ arguably differ substantially from full-time (or even part-time) employment and related communication, with interesting implications. For instance, regular employees in organizations that accept volunteers may feel threatened by outsiders who, by volunteering extensive time and effort, can not only do their jobs but, in some situations (e.g., strikes), take their jobs away from them.

On the other hand, volunteers can sometimes feel that they are treated as second-class citizens in their organization, despite their avowed value to it. In some settings, volunteers may feel that their prior (or current) occupations endow them with skills and education superior to those of full-time employees, who may, in turn, feel threatened by these volunteers. Especially when invited to undertake important but seemingly menial tasks, volunteers with particular talents or skills can feel frustrated or undervalued. However, optimal organizational dynamics and interpersonal relations can depend on volunteers' communicative suppression of these feelings.

Thus, in the context of volunteering, volunteers often assume a new social identity that requires them to balance their old identities with the emerging one so as to maintain positive intergroup relations (see Giles, 2012). As such, using an intergroup perspective to examine volunteer activity, particularly in organizations, may be a compelling avenue for future theoretical and empirical work.

Conclusion

Volunteering is an emergent area of research in the field of communication. This article has had two goals. First, we sought to demonstrate that volunteering is an inherently communicative phenomenon and to highlight ways that communication researchers could contribute to its study. Second, we proposed that the role of communication in the process of volunteering is particularly important for older adults and

may in fact account for many of the documented benefits of volunteering, particularly as they relate to successful aging. The functional focus of current research on volunteering—which comes primarily from economics, sociology, psychology, and political science—has provided only very limited knowledge about, for example, the nature of relationships forged and fostered among volunteers or the communicative management of these relationships; what kinds of talk permeate volunteering; or how and to what extent volunteers disclose their activities to others. To address these gaps in our current knowledge of the process of volunteering, we have outlined a research agenda for future empirical work on volunteering, communication, and successful aging. We hope this will encourage communication scholars to apply their expertise to addressing these important empirical questions, which are of considerable economic and social relevance to all people.

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