

**RESPECTING DIFFERENCE WITHOUT  
PRIVILEGING VISIBILITY:  
Prospects for Volunteering  
and Civic Engagement  
by Aging Baby Boomers**

Susan M. Chambré, Baruch College, City University of New York  
and F. Ellen Netting, Virginia Commonwealth University  
[Susan.chambre@baruch.cuny.edu](mailto:Susan.chambre@baruch.cuny.edu)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Current aging policy emphasizes the importance of volunteering and civic engagement as critical elements of successful aging. This article provides an historical overview of this strategy and describes three predictions about civic engagement and volunteerism among baby boomers. The evidence we marshal suggests that these three paradigms overlook the diversity of the aging population and are based on assumptions that are not supported by empirical research, particularly on the baby boom generation. We draw upon an emerging theory of aging, socioemotional selectivity theory, and previous research about volunteerism by elders to offer a series of recommendations that might frame future policies on civic engagement and volunteerism. Our recommendations are also based on the premise that there is a need for policies to recognize and to respect personal differences and lifestyle variations in the aging population without privileging highly visible roles over less visible activities that are critical to the societal fabric.

## Introduction

By 2020, 32.2 million 'leading edge' baby boomers in the U.S. will have passed their 65th birthdays. This demographic change has enormous consequences for American society and for the American economy. Prior to the 2008 economic downturn, it was anticipated that many boomers would withdraw from the labor force, collect Social Security and rely on Medicare. Now there is increasing speculation about many taking part-time jobs, assuming second careers, or staying in their current jobs longer, as expected "nest eggs" have declined in value. In 2004, two thirds of older boomers expected that their lives would be better five years later (AARP, 2004). In contrast, a 2008 study found that a majority of them are pessimistic about their future prospects: 55% expected that their incomes would not keep pace with changes in the cost of living over the next year and two-thirds thought that it was harder for people to get ahead than it was a decade ago (Cohn, 2008). Clearly, these are turbulent financial times and speculation about the future lives of the boomers will continue as individuals reassess their retirement plans and the timing associated with leaving the paid workforce.

Civic engagement is higher in the U.S, than in other countries (Anheier and Salamon, 1999). A 2003 AARP study of people age 45 and older estimated that 86% of people were involved in community service; 51% were involved in some type of formal volunteering with an organization, and 35% served other individuals or their community on an informal basis (AARP, 2003). Civic engagement of various types remains high until people are into their mid-seventies (Guterbock & Fries, 1997).

Despite evidence of comparatively high participation levels, there are also signs that civic engagement has declined and will continue to do so (Keeter, Zukin et. al., 2002; Putnam, 2000). One major area of speculation concerns future levels of volunteering and civic engagement as baby boomers move into their sixties, seventies and beyond (Kaskie & Imhof, 2008; Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Wilson & Simson, 2006). This speculation is particularly noteworthy because the generalizations that are being made about both civic engagement as a concept and baby boomers as a cohort have implications for the social construction of what constitutes civic and service activities and, as we will suggest, the false homogenization of a diverse aging population.

Much of the writing on the elements of successful aging for older persons has both a normative and a prescriptive aspect. Normatively, popular and scholarly articles extol the virtues of active civic engagement, particularly volunteering, and the importance of being productive as central to the health and well-being of older people (Burr, Caro & Moorhead, 2002; Herzog, Franks, et. al., n.d.). Prescriptively volunteering is being touted as the ultimate goal across generations so that civic engagement continues, vetted by foundations, nonprofit organizations and government (e.g. Gibson, 2006; National

Conference on Citizenship, 2007; Wilson & Simson, 2006). Yet, for several reasons we are not so certain that these norms and prescriptions tell the entire story.

Moreover, the idea that one size fits all does not work for such a diverse group as boomers (Light, 1988). There are different styles of aging (Burr, Mutchler & Caro, 2007; Prisuta, 2003). Growing numbers of people expect to continue to work and, as will be described in some detail, the nature of retirement is changing. Many people have not had past success with their volunteer work. They don't want routine, they enjoy the freedom of retirement (Moen, Fields, et. al., 2000) and they are not interested in returning to a work-like setting where they need to take direction and to work with other people. Many are happy being retired in all senses of the word; they enjoy having control over their time and the variety that comes from having limited time commitments. Others find fulfillment in the informal family and neighbor relations that occupy them, not to mention myriad social and leisure activities. Others are caring for family members of various ages, spending their time and energy in labor-intensive caregiving roles. In short, there are different views and approaches to aging. Perhaps the emphasis on engagement and productivity are an extension of the Protestant work ethic and a lack of ease about providing public and private resources to an "unproductive" or less visible group of people (Ekert, 1986).

In this paper we begin with an historical overview of the two concepts being used in this discourse: volunteerism and civic engagement. We briefly examine the major historical, cultural and policy shifts that have contributed to changing expectations about civic engagement for elders in American society. After a review of three predictions about civic engagement, we review how an emerging theory of aging, socioemotional selectivity theory, offers a powerful new way to conceptualize civic engagement in old age and serves as the basis for several recommendations that might frame future policies on civic engagement and volunteerism.

### **Volunteerism and Civic Engagement**

Contemporary public discourse makes frequent reference to volunteerism and civic engagement. It is critically important that the meanings of these concepts be examined because they convey different messages depending on how they are heard in the public discourse and their impact on social policy intent and practice.

#### **Volunteerism**

The concept of volunteerism has deep cultural roots in the United States. A history of U.S. volunteerism has been chronicled in Ellis and Noyes' (1990: 4) *By the People* in which they focus on how volunteers led community-based and social action initiatives throughout American history. "To volunteer is to choose to act in recognition of a need, with an attitude of social

responsibility and without concern for monetary profit, going between one's basic obligations." Freely choosing to act with an attitude of social responsibility is particularly relevant to the roles volunteers play. Going beyond one's basic obligations indicates that volunteers may be motivated to contribute to something beyond themselves (Netting, 2007).

Ellis and Noyes (1990) are cautious about how complicated it is to define the term volunteer, pointing out that research subjects and student interns are called "volunteers," members of the military are referred to as "the volunteer army" (in contrast to career military), and persons convicted of crimes become involuntary community service volunteers. Persons who receive stipends are called "quasi-volunteers," further complicating attempts at definition. Brudney (2005) adds that there are all types of volunteers including formal, informal, episodic, long-term, local, public, private, cross national, corporate, and even virtual volunteers. Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth (1996) content analyzed 11 widely used definitions of volunteer in order to empirically consider the conceptual nuances of the term and provided a provocative conceptual analysis.

During the 1900s, volunteer roles shifted in the U.S. in light of gender and racial politics. Whereas the Civil Rights Movement opened new roles for persons of color to participate in social movements, advocacy efforts, and social change (Ellis & Noyes, 1990; Perlmutter & Cnaan, 1993), proponents of the women's movement argued that women were exploited as volunteers, and that these traditional roles should be replaced with paid positions (Kaminer, 1984). Two federal statutes, the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 and the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (with subsequent amendments) mandated programs that institutionalized volunteerism within social policy. As a result multiple programs were launched, including AmeriCorps, Volunteers in Service in America (VISTA), the National Civilian Community Corps, Learn and Service America, the Points of Light Foundation, and National Senior Volunteer Corps (Senior Corps) (Tang, 2003:14). A renewed interest in volunteers culminated in the "1997 first-ever Presidents' Summit for America's Future, a historic meeting that brought unprecedented attention to volunteerism in service to the nation's young people" (Brudney, 1999: 385). The passage of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act (H.R. 1388) in 2009 reauthorized and reformed the national service laws. This act reaffirms the importance of volunteerism and was supported by a number of organizations including The Gerontological Society of America. The Act more than triples the number of AmeriCorps slots and earmarks one in ten positions to people over the age of 55 ("New Law Entices Older Volunteers," 2009).

## Civic Engagement

In an issue of *Generations* devoted to Civic Engagement in Later Life, Achenbaum (2006-07) examines the history of civic engagement in the United States by returning to Alexis de Tocqueville and his observations about the proclivity of Americans to create voluntary associations. Achenbaum identifies

three American traditions: 1) forming voluntary associations, 2) mobilizing political activism, and 3) advancing adult education which promotes civic engagement (p. 18). In that same issue, McBride (2006-07) very intentionally examines the concept. She explains that civic “connotes public consequence and engagement implies connectedness that goes beyond participation. Engagement connotes that the individual has actively applied her- or himself - physically or economically, through time, money and resources. Rarely is civic engagement about individual action alone; structures commonly facilitate and target the action for public good” (p. 66).

Martinson and Minkler (2006) indicate that a number of scholars are interchangeably using the concepts of volunteerism and civic engagement, reducing the latter “to the act of formal volunteering, [and thus ignoring] other activities associated with civic life, including voting, engaging in community activism, staying informed about current events, caregiving, and having informal connections” (p. 319). They reveal how discrepancies in lumping volunteerism and civic engagement as one and the same reduce the breath of civic engagement, which certainly includes volunteerism, but is not limited to volunteering. In fact, civic engagement can be distinguished from volunteerism “in that it also can include paid work experiences and requires a greater commitment than most volunteer opportunities” (Kaskie, Imhof, Cavanaugh, & Culp, 2008, p. 369).

Not only is this confusion over terms reflected in the gerontological literature but it is evident in higher education as well. In a White Paper from the New England Resource Center for Higher Education, Saltmarsh, Hartley and Clayton (2009) offer a provocative perspective on a Wingspread conference on civic engagement. They contend that higher education institutions appear to be bogged down in using civic engagement as such a broad umbrella term that it has lost its meaning. Focused on specific activities within defined places, it has often been reduced to local community engagement. The authors contend that true civic engagement is actually “democratic engagement” in which the intent is to be transformative, rather than simply serving a public relations function or using an expert model in which the university brings something to the community.

Based on the literature, it is our contention that civic engagement is a broad concept, encompassing volunteerism but not limited to that form of activity. In a democratic society, civic engagement becomes a connectional process in which citizens take on roles and responsibilities intended to move toward civil society as a way of life. The specific roles and responsibilities will depend upon multiple factors, but one thing is clear - in order for civic engagement to succeed there must be a mutual respect for the vast diversity of roles played. For example, the caregiver who has quit her job to care for her aging mother (and is often invisible) is contributing to the whole fabric of society as much as the political activist who works in a presidential campaign. Both roles are critical to sustaining and transforming a democratic society, and both are forms of civic engagement. It is important to note that civic engagement may often be misconstrued as primarily highly visible and publicly

recognized by others when in fact some forms of engagement are less visible but equally important to the functioning of society. Thus, the many calls for civic engagement may unintentionally be privileging certain forms over others, with the potential to subjugate many important roles that are less visible, yet vitally important. This is an important concern for policy-makers and practitioners alike.

### Historical Perspective

Well until the middle of the twentieth century, images of old age were dominated by the view that it was a time of limited and declining physical and mental abilities. The senior citizen or 'golden ager' was a dependent recipient of services rather than a contributor to society. Old age was not seen as a time for growth or renewal. In 1950 Robert Havighurst pointed out that "few old people have the vigor, or the money, or the skill to do in their later years what they have always wanted to do but somehow have not gotten around to doing in their earlier life." (p. 141). Many programs for older persons relied on what Otto Pollak (n.d.) labelled 'kinderspiel,' engaging older adults in the same kinds of play activities (e.g. arts and crafts, and bingo) as children. Havighurst surveyed one thousand people about the appropriateness of 91 different activities for older people. The results provide interesting insights into cultural conceptions about old age at that time. Activities which were highly approved included maintaining the lifestyle of middle age but with "'reasonable' tapering off" and participating in activities and roles that are deemed appropriate for old people including involvement in age segregated activities and active involvement with grandchildren and with church activities. Among those where there was strong disapproval were either being inactive or socially isolated but, at the same time, being overactive, acting much younger than their age and being 'overactive' such as running for office and seeking "the company of younger people most of the time" and getting married to a much younger person (Havighurst, 1950 145-146). In contrast, nearly two-thirds of Americans over 50 surveyed about their views toward retirement in 1999 viewed it as a time of beginning new chapters, being active and having new goals (Peter D. Hart Associates, 1999).

Havighurst's study captured a set of attitudes that were just beginning to change. By the end of the twentieth century, old age was viewed quite differently: as a time for second chances and new beginnings, especially a time to do things one didn't have a chance to do at an earlier time. Retirement communities featuring an 'active' lifestyle became living symbols of this view. Another important component of the optimal retirement lifestyle was to be involved in community life especially through volunteering. There are still strongholds of this view. For example, an advertisement by a large financial institution recently proclaimed, "We don't know when childhood ends, but it starts again at retirement" (The Hartford, 2007).

Volunteering was an essential element of this view. In the early 1960s, two articles published in social work journals proposed that organizations ought to systematically recruit older people as volunteers (Lambert, Guberman, & Morris, 1964; Worthington, 1963). Volunteer rates by older people were in fact significantly lower than for other age groups. The first major national survey of volunteer participation, done in 1965, noted that 9% of older people had volunteered in the past year compared to 16% of adults of all ages (Manpower Administration, 1965). Low levels of participation by elders were consistent with organizational practices where older volunteers were either not encouraged and in some cases actively discouraged from participating.

Indeed organizations would benefit from systematically recruiting older people since women were entering the labor force in large numbers and, in theory, full time homemaker volunteers could be replaced by older people, especially during daytime hours (Chambré, 1993). Largely influenced by the activity theory of aging in which older people were encouraged to replace lost roles with new ones, volunteering was conceptualized as a way to counteract 'role loss' and the shrinking of elders' lifeworlds with retirement, widowhood, and the empty nest (Chambré, 1984).

Efforts to promote volunteerism became an important part of aging policy. In 1966 New York's Community Service Society piloted a small scale program, called SERVE, which became the prototype for the federally supported Retired Senior Volunteer Program or RSVP (now called the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program) (Sainer & Callen, 1972). From 16 local programs in the U.S. in the mid-1960s, the number of national and local programs now defies estimation (Chambre, 2003). Relatively few people have actually participated in any of these programs at one time but their cultural impact has been significant. In 1988, 2% of older volunteers were involved in Foster Grandparent Programs, 4% worked for RSVP, 4% were involved in Senior Companion Programs and 8% were involved in AARP-sponsored programs (Chambré, 2003).

Despite the relatively small number of participants, the programs have had an important impact on the culture of volunteerism. Along with media representations of volunteerism as a way to 'make a difference' and 'give back,' the very existence of these programs has made volunteerism an important component of active elder lifestyles. They have made volunteerism attractive; recruited people and helped them to find appropriate jobs; and sometimes, with programs like RSVP, Senior Companion and Foster Grandparents, reduced economic barriers by providing stipends, car fare, or a free lunch. Thus, both interest in volunteerism and actual participation increased exponentially in the last three decades. For example, in 1974, only 10% of nonvolunteers over the age of 65 said they were interested in volunteer work compared to 25% and 37% in two surveys conducted in the early 1990s (Chambre, 2003).

Changed expectations about old age combined with specific policies targeting older volunteers had an amazing impact on the supply of older people engaged in volunteering. Although it is hard to compare data over time,

because of differences in survey methodology, data derived from Current Population Surveys, which yield lower proportions than other surveys, indicated that while 11% of people 65 and older volunteered in 1965, 14% did so in 1974 (Chambré, 1993). A 1974 National Council on the Aging survey revealed that 22% of people 65 and older had volunteered in the past year. Subsequent surveys found that there was a sharp rise in volunteerism in the population and that much of this increase was the result of a remarkable rise in participation by older persons (Chambre, 1993; Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006; Goss 1999). Einolf (2009:197) compared rates of volunteering among baby boomers, silent, and long civic cohorts in the Midlife in the U.S. panel study. He reported that contrary to some predictions that baby boomers will continue to volunteer in large numbers and “even if they volunteer in similar rates to previous cohorts, the sheer size of the boomer cohort will cause a large net increase in the number of elderly volunteers.”

In addition, when volunteering is defined broadly to include informally helping others on a regular basis, it becomes evident that the proportion of older volunteers is even higher. A Commonwealth Foundation study of older persons completed in 1992 observed that “More than 70 percent of all Americans age 55 and over, significantly more than previously imagined, are actively contributing to society, their families and communities” (1992, : 4).

Historically, it is clear that volunteerism and civic engagement for elders have been intimately tied to public policy in this country. Whereas older people were originally seen as retiring to a life of leisure or reduced activity, attitudes have changed as public and private programs have actively targeted and recruited older volunteers. Empirical evidence reveals a gradual increase in percentages of older volunteers during the last three decades. Given these changes, future projections are mixed and different views compete with one another over just how engaged boomers will be. Much of the recent research on the ‘engagement’ of older people uses even broader composite scores on involvement and combines formal and informal volunteering, which often includes helping family members, in measures that are now frequently defined as ‘productive aging.’

### Three Views About Boomers and Civic Engagement

Observers have forwarded three different views about boomers’ future civic engagement. These views are: 1) boomers will be less involved in civic and volunteer activities than their parents; 2) boomers will re-engage, returning to their activist roots; and 3) boomers will engage in new and different ways, reframing the concepts of work and retirement in the process. We propose that these three predominant views are actually reflections of three aging theories: disengagement, continuity, and activity. Each theory is built around a set of assumptions to be discussed below. We first describe these three predictions and then test their validity by drawing on research on older volunteers in general and baby boomers in particular.

## Disengagement: Boomers Will Be Less Involved

Robert Putnam, who has observed that civic engagement in the U.S. has generally been declining (Putnam, 2000), predicts that aging boomers will not be especially involved in various activities, particularly volunteering, as they age. He and a colleague conclude that:

A central challenge in getting boomers more involved is that religion has been a major engine for senior volunteering in the past and boomers are not an especially religious cohort. Moreover, boomers appear to be less involved than their parents and middle age is usually the peak for volunteering, so we may be at a high-water mark for volunteering unless we alter the normal shape of the curve (Sander with Putnam, 2006: 33).

Kristin Goss (1999), who used some of the same data as Putnam, offers a compelling argument that the growth in volunteering among older persons during the second half of the twentieth century has largely been due to the high levels of participation of the 'long civic generation,' also known as the 'greatest generation,' people born who grew up during the depression, experienced the high levels of patriotism during World War II and came into adulthood and raised their families during a time of sharp economic expansion during the 1950s and 1960s. .

This view was echoed in a study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health and the MetLife Foundation Initiative on Retirement and Civic Engagement (Harvard School of Public Health-Met Life Foundation, 2004). The report observed that in midlife, boomers were less involved in various types of civic activity - they voted less often and had lower levels of affiliation with community groups. Since participation was far higher in midlife than in old age, it was unlikely that boomers would be as involved in civic activities as their parents as they grew older without specific efforts that would stimulate their involvement.

## Continuity: Boomers Will Re-Engage

In contrast, a second much more optimistic perspective holds that boomers will have a major impact in their sixties and beyond just as they did during the 1960s when they were involved in the civil rights and antiwar movements. In *50+: Igniting a Revolution to Reinvent America*, Bill Novelli (2006), the CEO of AARP, pointed out that in their youth boomers became the 1960s activists who advocated for change in American society. This same generation could well be the leaders of a revolution to reinvent America now. For Novelli, the boomer generation could potentially be mobilized to have a major impact on American politics as their youthful idealism becomes reignited in their later years.

How likely might this be? First, the future is already with us. Although the boomers were primary participants in the major social transformations of that time - the Civil Rights and the anti-Viet Nam War movements, and were profoundly affected by a general loosening of social norms regarding sex and

drug use - they were following in the footsteps of a small vanguard of the so-called silent generation, what might be called pre-boomers, who challenged many aspects of American culture and politics. The leaders of the 60s revolution were, in fact, not boomers.

Novelli takes a view that is quite similar to the continuity theory of aging, in which people become more like themselves as they age. If a person was a radical in the 60s and mobilized peers to engage in change activities, continuity theory would posit that they are likely to remain engaged in social change. Similarly, for those persons who were not engaged in these types of activities, chances are they are not going to find them appealing in old age. Assumptions undergirding continuity theory, then, are that a volunteer will continue to seek familiar activities that have become part of an earlier self-identity as a person who volunteers.

A lifelong pattern of volunteering is the strongest predictor of whether a person will volunteer in their sixties and beyond. As Chambré (1984) pointed out about 25 years ago in the article "Is Volunteering a Substitute for Role Loss in Old Age?," older people who volunteer are probably volunteers who have grown older. Thus, the bulk of boomers who are likely to volunteer in the future are probably already involved in a variety of civic activities. There is limited but compelling evidence that continuity theory is applicable to volunteering since the strongest predictor of volunteering at one point in time is whether or not people volunteered in the past (Chambré & Einolf, 2008).

### **Activity: Boomers Will Engage in New and Different Ways**

A third view has been offered by a number of observers, most notably John Gardner (2003), the octogenarian visionary behind Civic Ventures now led by Marc Freedman (1999). Gardner is a former cabinet secretary, president of the Carnegie Corporation and the founder of Common Cause and the Independent Sector. Recognizing that Putnam's concern in *Bowling Alone* (2000) cried for a new generation to renew the connections between individuals and their communities, and building on concepts in Bellah and his colleagues (1991) work in *The Good Society*, Gardner and Freedman reframed the public discourse to one of social capital and engagement as diametrically opposite the notion of traditional retirement (Achenbaum, 2006-07). Civic Ventures, a San Francisco think tank, has taken the position that older people can play a central role in 'saving' civil society. According to this view, boomers are interested in social betterment; activating interests that require new roles, initiatives and programs to ensure that they become major contributors to civic life. In an essay entitled "The boomers, good work, and the next stage of life," Freedman (2005) pointed out that "Never before have so many Americans had so much experience — and so much time to do something with it... Realizing the experience dividend will be neither easy nor automatic. Rather, it will require renewed creativity at all levels—new perspectives, new policies, new pathways,

and most of all new opportunities to put to good use what individuals have learned through life.... Marc Freedman

Freedman's 2007 book, *Encore*, represents a major shift in thinking about the idea of engaging older people since it focuses on how older people can make important contributions as paid workers, not as volunteers which was his position in earlier work. Freedman argues for policies that redirect boomers into second careers doing community work. This view is based on the premise that boomers are less interested in retirement than their parents but want to spend their time 'giving back' to society in ways they might not have been able to do in their earlier careers.

The idea that boomers will engage in new ways, and will in the words of a Harvard University School of Public Health (2004) report, 'reinvent aging' implies that civic engagement may be a work substitute and that boomers are interested in continuing their work lives, albeit on a more part-time and informal basis. Volunteering, in this view, provides people with the kind of instrumental achievement typically found in a job.

Whether they are engaged in paid or unpaid work, the idea of enticing older people to think outside the box and embrace new activities is grounded in assumptions of the activity theory of aging. This approach assumes that older people will want to replace lost roles with new ones and are tied to concepts such as productive and successful aging. The activity theory-inspired view suggests that older people ought to volunteer to 'stay active.' The view of volunteerism as productive work is closely linked to current discussions of declining social capital and the need to reexamine the social contract between the young and the old.

### Comparing & Contrasting These Three Paradigms

Each of the three sets of assumptions comprise a paradigm which corresponds to one of the three major theoretical traditions in gerontology. Disengagement theory assumes that older people do not need (or want) to replace lost roles, that in fact they may want to be less active than in their earlier lives. Continuity theory assumes that life-long patterns will continue. Thus, the less engaged person will continue to be relatively uninvolved and people who are more socially engaged will continue to be relatively involved. Activity theory is based on assumptions that productive and successful aging is contingent on remaining active and replacing lost roles with new roles. How valid are each of these three views? Are the boomers an important part of an overall decline in civic engagement? Might their youthful idealism be reignited now that they are relatively free of work and family obligations? What is the potential for large numbers of boomers entering second careers or volunteer roles that provide civic and community service? Data on current and future anticipated priorities of boomers suggest that each of these questions oversimplifies what we know about the civic engagement, the political attitudes, religious commitments, and other features of the lifestyles of

boomers, and the relationship between retirement and various dimensions of civic engagement, particularly volunteering.

### Will Boomers Engage?

As the 'long civic generation' begins to withdraw from civic life, with illness and death, the key question is whether similar patterns will occur for the boomers as for their parents. As a group, the boomers would seem to be even more likely prospects for civic involvement because they possess the human capital, cultural capital and status characteristics associated with high levels of engagement. They are better educated, more affluent and have occupational skills that make them attractive volunteers in contrast to earlier generations (Hughes & O'Rand, 2004). Their youthful idealism may be translated into high levels of activism now that they may be less enmeshed with the obligations of earning a living and raising a family. On the other hand, the image of boomers, as the 'me' generation might suggest that they are not terribly interested in civic life.

Supporting the view that boomers will be less involved is *Bowling Alone*, in which Robert Putnam (2000) documents the decline in various measures of social and civic engagement. In contrast to Putnam, who found reduced engagement in volunteerism as a whole, other studies do not indicate that the boomers are less civically engaged than previous generations. Empirical data from various sources provides significant evidence that leading edge boomers have high engagement in volunteerism in midlife and are likely to volunteer as they age. Putnam's conclusions have been challenged by a number of observers most notably by Ladd (1999) who presents clear evidence that there has been a proliferation of social groups and that engagement has been redirected into other activities and types of organizations.

A common image of boomers as the 'me' generation is also not supported in recent research. As a group, they have significant family obligations which place important constraints on their discretionary time and their money. With the lengthening of life expectancy and of the childbearing years, more and more boomers are part of a 'sandwich generation' providing care to both parents and children simultaneously. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2005), for example, pointed out that one in eight boomers was actively involved in caring for aging parents and one in five provided parents with some financial support. More than eighty percent had children; half were providing the bulk of financial support to a minor child and 17% provided money to children over the age of 18.

A large percentage of boomers who volunteer do so because of a sense of social responsibility rather than motives related to their own benefit. The 2003 AARP Time and Money survey (AARP, 2003) asked volunteers over the age of 45 about the major reasons why they were involved. The most common reason, cited by 65%, was because of a sense of "personal responsibility to help others." Large proportions also indicated an interest in helping their community (50%), making a difference for a particular issue (49%) or for their

religious beliefs (42%). Also important were reasons more directly related to benefiting individuals: making life more satisfying (58%), keeping active (46%) or a way to feel needed (35%).

James Scheibel, the Vice President of the Corporation for National Service, recently observed "Whatever the assignment, the focus of senior service must be on getting things done - doing real work, meeting serious needs, and demonstrating clear results. That's what volunteers want, and what communities need. Just as workers get satisfaction from tackling a major challenge, volunteers want to be part of an effort that is having a direct impact" (Scheibel, 1996 :32). This idea may be overstated. Volunteer work and paid work have a complicated relationship and it is far from clear that volunteering is truly a substitute for work. More likely, it is a social and leisure activity that is more related to community building, a desire for accomplishment and social integration than a desire to find an alternative to a 'job.' Several studies, dating back to the early eighties (Chambré, 1987) and more recent work (Chambre & Einolf, 2008; Moen & Fields, 2002). show that the highest levels of participation are among people who combine part-time paid jobs with volunteer jobs.

The most recent data based on the 2005 Current Population survey indicates that one quarter of boomers who were not in the labor force volunteered compared to one-third of those working full time and close to half (46.3%) who work part time ("Baby Boomers and Volunteering," n.d). These findings, and a recent analysis that reveals that a work substitution model of volunteering is not highly predictive (Chambré & Einolf, 2008) suggest that it might be more appropriate to conceptualize volunteering as an alternative to other forms of leisure. Robert Butler (1977: 1372) made a similar point when he observed, "Even the most avid retired golfers can tire of days spent exchanging long walks for greens fees." (p. 1372). It is important to note that Martinson and Minkler (2006) remind productive aging enthusiasts that there is a downside to approaches that emphasize activity and assume that everyone should be engaged.

The volunteer patterns of boomers will be quite different from their parents in another way. A long term trend toward early retirement began to reverse in 1985 (Harvard School of Public Health-Met Life Foundation, 2004) and since then, people have remained in the labor force for longer periods. This trend will accelerate since 76% of boomers surveyed in 2005 said that they expected to retire from their current job at the average age of 64 but expect to continue to work. Indeed, only 17% of boomers "hope to never work again" (Merrill Lynch, 2005). Given current economic conditions, there is the possibility that even persons who anticipated that they would retire may begin to stay on their current jobs longer rather than seek new part-time jobs or start businesses. These trends promise to have a complex impact on future involvement in volunteering. They suggest a large supply of future volunteers but a smaller number of people who will devote large blocks of time to unpaid work. In fact volunteering is a lower priority than many other activities.

Although interest in volunteering is high, an AARP (2006) study found that 47%

of a sample of boomers who turned 60 in 2006 said they wanted to “do more volunteering,” this was much lower than the 72% who wanted to “spend more time on their interests and hobbies.”

Volunteering is part of a broader set of lifestyle patterns and more common for people with stronger social connections (Brown & Ferris, 2007). A great deal of volunteering at any age is focused on activities that are connected to people’s lives which is why the tendency to volunteer is very much influenced by a person’s stage in the lifecycle. Other social roles - parenthood, in particular - link people to various volunteer and voluntary association activities. These kinds of links to volunteering become more tenuous as people grow older which is why it is much more essential to actively recruit older people as volunteers. A large number of people come to volunteer because someone asks them to do a particular job. Turnover - which tends to be quite high, currently 25% among boomers in one year - is lower when people are specifically asked to become involved (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007).

Putnam’s projection of low volunteering in the future is also based on the premise that boomers, as a group, have low levels of involvement in religion and in religious organizations which are, in many respects, major mobilizing institutions for civic engagement and volunteering (Verba, Shlozman & Brady, 1995; Wilson & Janoski, 1995). This is not only the case because participation in religious organizations itself promotes volunteering for churches and synagogues (Cnaan, et. al., 2002) because religion provides a cognitive map and set of motivations for becoming involved in community work (Lichterman, 2008). Data from the General Social Survey reveal that leading edge boomers, those born between 1945 and 1954 became more involved in religion between the 1970s and the 1980s. As they aged, a larger proportion of them attended worship services on a frequent basis. More than 90% of this increase was due to either changes in family status - having children brought people back to church or to synagogue - or a rise in the proportion of boomers who became politically more conservative. On the other hand, this cohort had lower levels of church and synagogue attendance than older cohorts. This is consistent with other research that points out rising interest in non-institutional forms of spirituality, especially among boomers (Roof, 2001; Roozen, McKinney & Thompson, 1990).

### **Will Boomers Become ‘Wrinkled Radicals’?**

Observations that the boomers will ‘ignite’ a social revolution can be traced to Maggie Kuhn (1976), the founder of the Grey Panthers, who believed that “As wrinkled radicals and liberated old people, we can testify that our new roles empower us and hopefully release new power and energy in the places where we live as liberators, social critics, responsible consumers, and public citizens” (p. 96).

Considerable research suggests that there is not a large group of latent revolutionaries but rather, that the people who have spent their lives being involved in political and civic issues will simply continue to do this (Jennings, 1987; Stewart, Settles & Winter, 1998). While political attitudes change in the course of people's lives (Dangelis, Hardy & Cutler, 2007), continuity theory appears to be highly explanatory of political activism since numerous studies reveal a persistence of activism and a continued tendency to be politically engaged over the life course (Marwell, Aiken & Demerath, 1987). However, the results of various studies tend to be complex and contradictory.

There is a great deal of evidence that the political activists of the 60s, both on the left and the right, remained politically active as they grew older but the results are complex. However, Klatch (2000) found that youthful idealism was often channeled into career choices and that work and family commitments led to reduced involvement in political work.

But, there is also some evidence of discontinuity in both political attitudes and levels of activism. Duane Alwin (1998) found that while many boomers continue to be politically liberal, there has been a growth in boomers who identify with the Republican party. Similar results were found in several other studies. A follow up study of three groups of those in the sixties generation - civil rights activists, those actively involved in student government and a sample of politically uninvolved students - concluded that although some of the formerly uninvolved became more active in midlife, there was a great deal of continuity for the activists. However, by the 1980s, both activists and the politically uninvolved became more conservative (Fendrich & Turner, 1989). Indeed, two-thirds of boomers surveyed in 2002 believe that "U.S. military power should be increased" compared to 41% who were interviewed in the seventies (AARP, 2002).

As a generation, then, the boomers are a politically diverse group. Its members include George W. Bush as well as Bill and Hillary Clinton. Paul Lyons (1996) points out that the boomers included both those who protested the Vietnam War and those who served. These political differences, in fact, persisted into middle age (Jennings, 2002). John Williamson (1998:55) points out that the activism of the sixties generation may have been overstated since, "While there were many mass demonstrations, most of those involved were college students. A majority of boomers were not in college, and most college students were not activists. Many who attended a few demonstrations had far too casual an involvement to be described as activists."

There is one additional reason why Kuhn's prediction may be overstated. Over the past forty years, American civic life has become increasingly dominated by professional advocacy groups where membership rarely involves active participation or even attending a meeting but is limited to writing a check (Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999). Civic and advocacy groups have become dominated by paid staff giving volunteers a more limited role than in the past; in many cases, civic engagement may instead be 'checkbook activism.'

Instead of being 'wrinkled radicals,' then, there is more evidence that boomers might operate as an age-based interest group rather than as a critical

mass for major political reform. Williamson (1998: 60), for example, predicts that boomers “will carry many of their midlife social and political interests into old age. While the attention given to aging issues will increase, it would be a mistake to assume that their activism will focus on Social Security and Medicare.” He implies that their positions will not necessarily be ‘revolutionary’ but rather will be protective of their interests, much like the case when older people themselves were a major influence in repealing Medicare’s catastrophic insurance provision in the late 1980s.

### **Will Boomers Engage in New Ways?**

Numerous reports suggest that nonprofit organizations need to rethink many aspects of their operations, particularly their recruitment of volunteers, in order to tap the time and the talents of the million people born between 1946 and 1964. Concerns are being expressed over institutional capacity - the ability of organizations that want to attract volunteers to be able to maximize their use, particularly if a large cohort of baby boomers descend upon them in the coming years (Hong, Morrow-Howell, Tang, & Hinterlong, 2009). The message is that nonprofits need to get themselves ready to recruit a generation of volunteers who are not terribly interested in retiring completely and who want to devote much of their time to contributing to the well-being of their communities. While many of these discussions are backed up by carefully conducted research studies, much of the public discourse is highly speculative, since the results are complicated and are not subject to simple formulas about how to ‘market’ volunteering to boomers. Boomers are already working in nonprofits - as staff and as volunteers - and there is no reason to think that growing older will lead them to take to the barricades as some of them did in the 60s.

In an effort to expand participation, numerous organizations sponsor ‘make a difference’ days to give people a one-time opportunity in the hope that this will give them a taste for volunteering. While any such effort is commendable, one wonders whether a person who ladles out soup, paints a room, or has a brief conversation can honestly feel after one day that he or she has truly made a difference. Volunteer work, either of the one-day kind or of the longer-term variety, is not always so fulfilling. But, it can be satisfying if one feels that the work is part of a larger whole. The idea of individuals making a difference plays into a narcissistic and ‘quick fix’ emphasis in our culture rather than the more realistic idea that individual and social change and improvement are difficult and slow.

As a group, boomers are already actively involved in nonprofits as staff, donors and volunteers. U.S. Census data (which have volunteer rates far below what was found in studies done by Independent Sector) indicate that boomers are volunteering at the highest rate for any age group in the society. But their high volunteer rate may be the result of their current stage in the life cycle since people tend to volunteer in connection with family roles, and many boomers are still raising children. Among the older boomers, those over the age

of fifty, they are especially interested in working with the most vulnerable in our society - the old and the young - and express a sincere desire to 'do good.'

Much of the discussion about boomers' prospects for volunteering suggests that they are not so interested in doing routine work like stuffing envelopes and filing. Yet, with a current average of two hours each week spent volunteering over the course of a year and a decline in the proportion of all volunteers who spend more than this over the course of a year over the past, one wonders whether the claims that organizations need to tailor their volunteer programs to meet the needs of boomers will, in fact, be cost effective. Many organizations require far more than two hours a week in order to provide people with responsible and meaningful tasks. While many organizations can utilize the services of volunteers who are willing to make a commitment on a time-limited basis, called 'episodic volunteering,' the administrative time and effort involved in working with the many boomers who want to find 'meaning' but are unwilling to make a regular commitment requires careful thought and planning. The success of time-limited volunteer programs, which institutionalize episodic volunteering, might be applicable to boomers. For example, programs like New York Cares, where people sign up for assignments each month, might be specifically directed to older people.

Turnover among boomer volunteers is considerable. Turnover among volunteers in general is enormous. A recent study done by the Corporation for National and Community Service describes a 'leaky bucket' since one-third of the people who volunteered in 2005 were not involved in 2006 (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007). This increased over a two year period. How then might a volunteer coordinator most effectively respond to this challenge? It seems that nonprofit managers need to make a distinction between highly committed volunteers and those with a much more casual attachment. Volunteer managers need to build in opportunities for two kinds of people. First, there are the highly committed current volunteers who may be part of the civic core. These volunteers are loyal unpaid staff. At the same time, people interested in episodic and project-based volunteering need to hit the ground running and either be provided with the kinds of tasks that might not require much training or encouraged to think about the contribution they might make were they willing to make a stronger commitment.

New volunteers - the kinds of people who begin to volunteer in response to retirement, widowhood and the empty nest - need to be recruited in different ways. Lacking past experience may mean that they require more effort to recruit and a greater level of support to develop realistic expectations and find satisfaction in working for free. There is also an enormous payoff to recruiting retired people as volunteers since people who are out of the labor force devote a larger number of hours, on average, to volunteer work than those who continue to work. The trick, then, may be for organizations to attract working boomers as they age and to help them expand their commitment as they withdraw from their paid jobs.

While it is useful then to think of new strategies and programs to attract boomers, it is also important to make certain that a broad range of groups that

have relied heavily on volunteers - hospitals, political groups, the Red Cross, and youth organizations - are able to continue their work with volunteers. Interest in volunteering is already high. Boomers do not have to be convinced that they might want to volunteer. More important are the organizational barriers and obstacles to volunteering. Matching volunteers to jobs is often a haphazard, confusing process that requires more probing and sensitivity than is now possible on volunteer matching websites.

The future is now. As many boomers juggle the obligations of raising children and caring for aging parents and seek to continue to work, often on a part time basis for personal satisfaction or to supplement savings and pensions, nonprofit organizations are faced with attempting to prepare themselves for what will be a very diverse generation of older people

Funds now being spent to create programs to attract the boomers are worthy endeavors but they are no substitute for what is often the key ingredient to effective participation: trained and appropriately compensated volunteer managers who are engaged in the labor intensive work of matching volunteers with appropriate work, supervising and supporting them and, when it is appropriate, helping them to change volunteer jobs.

### **An Alternative Paradigm of Boomer Engagement**

The empirical evidence presented in this article challenges all three of the prevailing paradigms about the future civic and volunteer engagement of baby boomers. Their participation is currently high, which suggests continued involvement, contrary to Putnam's view. There is little evidence that boomers are poised to return to their youthful idealism - since the activism of the sixties generation is overstated and, in fact, this group has always been politically diverse. Indeed, many more of them express conservative political views and they are far from becoming 'wrinkled radicals.' Finally, the idea that boomers are seeking to continue to work or that volunteering is a work substitute is not always clear.

Activity, disengagement and continuity theories of aging have a long history in gerontological circles and depending on which sets of assumptions one holds, they have influenced policy and practice in different ways. Yet, just over 15 years ago, another theoretical perspective emerged -- socioemotional selectivity theory (Cartensen, 1992). Socioemotional selectivity resonates with our analysis of research on volunteerism and civic engagement and has actually been applied to volunteerism in later life (Hendricks & Cutler, 2004) Cartensen (1992) explains her approach as a lifelong aging perspective, not a theory that solely relates to old age. She contends that by the age of three or four human beings begin to show preferences for certain types of partners and subgroups. Throughout one's life course, certain selections are cultivating one's social network and in developing social patterns of interaction. This unfolding process and what one discovers socio-emotionally becomes part of one's unique identity. Because this process consumes energy and time, "people must make

discriminating choices among social partners to optimize the gains from social contact" (p. 332). Further, it is also likely to be the case that a person's perception of time certainly conditions choices about how to spend time. Activities that have been pleasurable in the past would be given higher priority by an older person, whose lifespan is certainly shorter than a younger person's. Thus, the "salience of particular social goals is influenced by the perception of time" (Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles, 1999, p. 169). Hendricks and Cutler's (2004) research on socioemotional selectivity theory and volunteering revealed that it is quite likely that older persons optimize their personal goals in choosing and changing volunteer activities. Building on socioemotional selectivity theory, we present several recommendations based on empirical research on volunteering and civic engagement.

### **Stress the Communal and Membership Aspects of Formal Volunteering**

In contrast to the idea that people are civically engaged as a way of replacing lost work roles, suggested by activity theory, we believe that it is helpful to consider that people of all ages, including boomers, may be attracted by the communal and membership aspects of volunteering, not primarily the impact of the work. This means that it is important to emphasize the process, not merely the outcome. Rather than helping people to see volunteering as 'making a difference,' it might be beneficial to emphasize volunteering as a small step, albeit a desirable one, in becoming an engaged community member. Numerous studies indicate that volunteerism is higher among people with stronger social ties and higher levels of other kinds of social and recreational activities (Chambré, 1987; Musick and Wilson, 2008). Defining volunteering as a membership, communal or even leisure activity may be a more successful strategy for recruiting volunteers than defining it as 'productive work.'

Despite the emphasis in volunteer administration on the need to clearly define a volunteer's 'job,' it appears to be important to emphasize the cause and the mission of the organization to which a volunteer chooses to donate time. Overwhelmingly Americans volunteer because they want to help people. While it is desirable to do something interesting and enjoyable, volunteer work has an important expressive and subjective side. It's not just the work itself but the purpose and the social relationships that volunteers encounter. This relational aspect of volunteering has been referred to as psychological contracting (Farmer & Fecor, 1999). Much of what may need to be done is uninteresting work -- the favorite example is stuffing envelopes. Volunteers may actually be happy doing this kind of work if they do it with pleasant people in a comfortable setting for an organization whose purpose they endorse. In fact, it may be a social time for bonding with others in taking incremental steps within the context of a vision for change. The task itself may not appear to be meaningful, unless viewed in context.

## Religious and Spiritual Motives are More Salient than Reciprocity

The view of volunteering as part of 'productive aging' stresses the idea that older people should volunteer as a kind of reciprocity for the material well-being most of them enjoy thanks to the existence of Social Security, Medicare, other financial entitlements and social services. Many older people view themselves as past contributors, having paid their Social Security contributions and their taxes. Suggesting to them that they 'owe' society something violates this long-term understanding and becomes very judgmental.

Shaped by religious and spiritual traditions, many people of all ages, including and particularly elders, are motivated by the desire to help people. We need to learn more about what motivates older people to volunteer since virtually all of the research is based on surveys and there is a pressing need for in-depth, qualitative studies rather than those which ask the same questions over and over again to demonstrate that older people are willing to volunteer if they are asked.

## Expand the Commitment of Current Volunteers

While it is desirable to focus on encouraging the involvement of those with limited past participation, the small number of hours contributed by current older volunteers ought not to be overlooked. The 1996 Independent Sector Survey documents that older people volunteer about the same number of hours each week as adults of all ages.<sup>1</sup> Several studies document that continuity theory is more meaningful than activity theory in understanding the dynamics of older volunteers. Current volunteers are those who are continuing past patterns of involvement which continue and perhaps become redirected in old age (Chambré, 1993).

Socioemotional selectivity theory is a welcome addition to continuity theory in that it provides insight into how continuity works. If a person becomes more of whom they are (continuity), then socioemotional selectivity theory requires us to consider what strategies have been used by that person to develop one's social self and construct a consistent identity throughout the lifecourse. If civic engagement activities, including volunteering, have become part of this selection process, chances are that these are meaningful in some way or they would not have remained part of an older person's social pattern.

## Improve Management for All Volunteers

In volunteering, as in other areas of life, the age-segregation that Maggie Kuhn rejected, has mixed benefits. On the one hand, the identity of being an RSVP volunteer confers a kind of laudable membership. RSVP volunteers also participate in mixed-age settings where they are indistinguishable from non-RSVP volunteers. The current emphasis on recruiting volunteers through America's Promise has not as yet been accompanied by efforts to build a stronger infrastructure. It is not enough to get people to volunteer by stimulating interest and presenting false expectations that they make a difference. These efforts need to be accompanied by good day-to-day management and adequate resources. The field of volunteer management has been segregated from nonprofit management rather than being a subfield. This sometimes promotes a lack of integration in planning for volunteers as a resource, and perhaps results in the low prestige and dispensable nature of many volunteer departments. Well-run volunteer programs will attract older volunteers just as they will attract people of all ages.

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<sup>1</sup> All adults volunteered 4.2 hours per week as compared to 4.1 for volunteers between 65 and 74 volunteer 4.4 hours for those over 75. (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1996).

## Conclusion

In closing, we want to point out that different views of volunteerism and civic engagement serve a purpose. Their assumptions help us to organize and to understand reality. However, when they mislead rather than illuminate, they can distort programs and institutions and, in the process, subvert important goals like participation in communal life by elders with talents, skills and experience that are greatly needed at a time of rapid social change.

Active involvement as volunteers and caregivers has an important economic impact: time donated to organizations or caregiving means that either the state or individual families are relieved of the financial costs of providing assistance, estimated at between \$97.6 and \$201 billion in 2002 for people age 55 and older (Johnson & Schaner, 2005). There are both individual and social benefits to high levels of engagement. People who are involved in an array of activities have better physical and mental health. This not only has individual benefits but, in theory, could lead to reductions in the public cost of providing health care. Finally, high levels of civic engagement will have an important political impact. The parents of the boomers had a major impact on public policy through their active participation in the political process through voting, lobbying, and other forms of institutional politics. The benefits hold promise and potential.

Yet, even with the potential for civic engagement by the boomers there are hidden ironies. Knowing that older people are a heterogeneous population, it is somewhat disconcerting that they are often blithely categorized into generational labels as if they comprise an homogeneous group - the boomers. Care must be taken in recognizing that there will be great diversity in this group of aging citizens, so much so that some will disengage, others will continue with roles they have played that form their identities, and others will seek new ways to think outside the box. Yet socioemotional selectivity theory offers a way to understand this diversity in recognizing lifecourse patterns.

Even though there is a movement for political correctness that privileges the more visibly engaged views, it is important to recognize that there are invisible people who provide long hours of caregiving behind the scenes. They may never be seen as "civically engaged," but they are. There are neighbors who drive one another to the doctor or provide respite. No one will see these actions, but they are civically engaged. Enthusiasm for the more visible roles that often come in the form of formal volunteerism can easily subjugate the less visible roles, projecting a message that one is obligated to be "seen" or they are not good, productive citizens.

Finally, recent empirical data suggest a need to be more critical about the assumption that higher social activity generally contributes to longevity. Data from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Aging provide strong evidence that having friends and confidants has a greater impact on survival than overall network size (Giles, Glonek, et. al., 2005). Civic engagement and volunteering may be beneficial in many ways but their presumed impact on health and longevity may be a reflection of self selection rather than the direct impact of

participation. There is a need to understand that there may be different styles of successful aging. Indeed, as a group, older people are more satisfied with the size of their social networks than younger people. Their social networks do not shrink as predicted by activity theory and perhaps they are more selective about their contacts in an effort to maximize their happiness (Lansford, Sherman & Antonucci, 1998).

Perhaps there are two overriding policy dilemmas that must be tackled as a society. First, is how to balance a respect for difference without privileging more visible initiatives and opportunities. And second is how to develop policies that both promote civic engagement in ways that are sensitive and responsive to diversity.

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