

# ‘Payback time’: community volunteering among older adults as a transformative mechanism

MIYA NARUSHIMA\*

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explores the conditions and experiences of older adults’ ‘formal’ volunteering through non-profit organisations (NPOs) in Toronto from both organisational and individual perspectives. In spite of the ageing population and the need for NPOs to expand their services, the participation of Canadian seniors in community volunteering has been stagnant for 15 years. What organisational and structural supports might encourage the expansion of volunteering among this group? How do current administrative conditions impact upon senior volunteers? What do older adults expect to gain from community volunteering? The qualitative data collected through interviews, documents and participant observation are analysed using an inter-disciplinary framework that combines theories of the moral economy of ageing, adult development and transformative learning. The results include a socio-demographic profile of senior volunteers in 12 Toronto NPOs, and the administrative characteristics of the six organisations that engage the majority. It is argued that the self-help and transformative mechanisms embedded in community volunteering provide opportunities for retirees to sustain their self-esteem and sense of wellbeing, while cultivating ‘generativity’ in late adulthood. Promoting transformative learning enables community volunteering to provide meaningful roles for seniors, and promotes citizenship participation and the social economy in an ageing society.

**KEY WORDS** – older people, community volunteering, generativity, learning, social economy.

## **The context of the study**

Given the combination of Canada’s ageing population, the increasing pressure for non-profit organisations (NPOs) to expand their community services in response to languishing public welfare, and the stagnant participation ratio of older people in ‘formal’ volunteering, it is important to shed more light on volunteerism among older Canadians. *Statistics Canada*

\* Asian Institute, Munk Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto, Canada.

has estimated that the ratio of 'seniors' (aged 65 or more years) will have almost doubled in 25 years (to 22.4% by 2030) (Noland 1994). Population ageing has raised concerns that public expenditure will be unable to support the forecast number of dependent older people. Given that the policy debate is founded on the premise that retirees are 'post-productive service recipients' (Marshall 1994; Novac 1993), key concepts such as the 'exclusion of older people' (Chappell 2001) and 'structural lag' (Riley and Riley Jr 1994), which reflect the gap between the capabilities of older adults and society's inability to value and utilise those strengths, are neglected.

The fraying social safety net brought about by welfare reform (at least in Canada) is another concern. Cuts in public funding for health, education and social services since the 1990s are bringing about leaner government, more privatisation, and more emphasis on individual responsibility or self-support. The gap between the 'service-rich' and 'service poor' has been expanding, which in turn has caused a growing demand for NPOs to expand their services (Norland 1994). Yet Canadian NPOs, which developed after the Second World War through a strong partnership with governments, are now faced with reduced public funding and a struggle for survival (Bowen 1997). Reed and Howe's study of 40 voluntary organisations in Ontario reported, for example, that a lack of volunteers and income instability were widely shared (Statistics Canada 2000).

Given these social trends, one might expect that community volunteering among older Canadians would be rising, but those aged 65 or more years are a minority: their rate of participation as volunteers was 18 per cent in 2000, virtually unchanged since 1986 and 10 percentage points lower than among those aged 15–64 years (Statistics Canada 1998, 2001). It should be noted, however, that seniors are the most committed volunteers: in 2000, they volunteered for on average 269 hours, compared with 162 hours for other age groups (Statistics Canada 2001). Chappell and Prince (1997) found that many Canadian seniors who were volunteers were prepared to put in more time, while many who were not were prepared to do so. From this evidence they concluded that volunteering among seniors could be expanded if appropriate information and meaningful activities were offered and effective interventions made. Clearly the potential contribution of seniors deserves more attention.

## **Two dimensions of community volunteering**

The formal community volunteering organised by NPOs is a collective as well as an individual activity. The literature on community volunteering from a societal perspective tends to underscore its value to the social

economy. Quarter (1992: x), for example, asserted that unpaid voluntary work played a vital role in Canada's 'social economy', which he defined as 'an integrated system of institutions working on common social goals', as well as offering 'a vision of social transformation'. NPOs (or 'third sector' organisations) are thus viewed as a preferred medium for providing collective goods, since volunteering directly connects individuals to their communities and breeds the sense of social obligation needed for action at the local level (Salamon 1994, 2003). The premise is that volunteering can transform an individual's consciousness and her or his commitment toward their community (Rifkin 1995). Despite the importance of community volunteering as a promoter of citizenship participation and the social economy, it cannot be assumed that this idealised vision will be spontaneously realised; rather, we must determine what factors lead individuals to make the social commitment.

In the literature on the personal dimension of volunteering, the multiplicity of both 'altruistic' and 'egotistic' motivations is a central theme (Danoff and Kopel 1994; Latting 1990; Snyder and Clary 2003). Wuthnow (1991) called the superficially antagonistic dual motivations, to benefit both self and others, 'charitable individualism': 'being intensely committed to self-realisation and material pleasure did not seem to be incompatible with doing volunteer work. People who were the most individualistic were also the most likely to value doing things to help others', because 'helping the needy is something you choose to do, often as a way to learn about yourself, or to gain some satisfaction' (1991: 147).

Clary and Snyder (1991; Snyder and Clary 2003) focused on the egotistic motivations, and suggested that six psychological functions were served by volunteering: values (*i.e.* expressing beliefs about the importance of helping others), social (*i.e.* affirming or confronting the norms of significant others), career (*i.e.* seeking ways to get started or promoted), enhancement (*e.g.* enhancing one's sense of self worth), protective (*i.e.* escaping negative feelings), and understanding (*e.g.* engaging in activities that promote learning). These multiple motivations suggest that the reciprocity of voluntarism attracts many people. Both the multiplicity of motivations and reciprocity were revealed by the results of the aforementioned 2000 survey (Statistics Canada 2001). Almost all (95%) volunteers wanted 'to help a cause they believed in', and simultaneously 81 per cent volunteered 'to put their skills and experience to use', 69 per cent 'to be personally affected by the cause the organisation supports', and 57 per cent chose to volunteer as an opportunity 'to explore their own strength'.

Chappell and Prince's (1997) study of Canadian seniors found that older volunteers had different motivations and voluntary activities from middle-aged volunteers, and they concluded that while motivation and the

frequency of volunteering were unrelated, motivation and activity type were – senior volunteers stressed obligation and social value and thus tended to be involved in service provision, while those volunteering out of self-interest were more involved in information sharing. Okun's (1994) study of American seniors, however, reported that the three most frequent reasons for volunteering were to 'help others' (83%), 'to feel useful or productive' (65%), and 'to fulfil a moral responsibility' (51%). Of particular interest is the finding that, when compared to others, those who chose 'feeling useful or productive' as the main reason were over four times more likely to volunteer two or more times a month. Some older adults frequently volunteer to sustain their self-esteem (Okun 1994; Okun, Barr and Herzog 1998). Although moral values and social obligation motivate older volunteers slightly more than other age groups, motivational multiplicity and reciprocity also apply to older volunteers. The questions raised here are whether the strong sense of social obligation found among older volunteers relates to their lifecourse stage, and in what way the altruistic and selfish motivations are inter-related.

### **The theoretical framework: linking micro and macro propositions**

This study seeks to raise our understanding of older people's volunteering by linking macro- and micro-models and conceptualisations, and it pursues an inter-disciplinary approach by combining theories of the moral economy of ageing with those of adult development and transformative learning. According to Hendricks and Leedham (1991), the reasoning of moral economy juxtaposes two prototypes: one grounded in 'exchange value' and the other in 'use value'. The former evaluates individuals and their productivity in terms of their market potential, while the latter focuses on how best to connect productive activities with human needs to 'create social arrangements that maximize life chances for all members of society over time, given resource constraints' (1991: 56). The moral economy of ageing perspective in critical gerontology advocates the promotion of the latter, which in turn overlaps with the notion that community volunteering nourishes the social economy.

Erikson's (1985) typology of the psychosocial developmental tasks for middle to late adulthood, such as achieving 'generativity' and 'ego-integrity', also provide a basis for analysing from a life-span perspective both older volunteers' motivations and their changes in self-concept through volunteering. 'Generativity' is associated with the challenges of establishing, guiding and caring for future generations. McAdams and Logan (2003) argued that 'generativity' springs from desires that are both

selfless (or altruistic) and selfish (or narcissistic), and that highly generative adults tend to express a strong need for both. These polarised human desires echo Wuthnow's (1991) formulation that 'charitable individualism' underlies community volunteerism. 'Ego-integrity' involves self-acceptance in late adulthood, which requires adapting oneself to increasing physical limitations and social losses, while learning to transcend oneself through spiritual growth.

In contrast to the hierarchical and age-graded representation of adult development by developmental psychologists, building from concepts borrowed from adult education, Mezirow (1994, 2000) offered a looser representation of the process of learning that involves a transformation of one's 'frames of reference' or perspectives. Through 'transformative learning', adults can become 'unified rational selves' (Tennant 1993), or 'more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action' (Mezirow 2000: 6). Transformative learning is an individual as well as a social process, and thus can enhance an individual's autonomy as well as interdependence by empowering them into collective action to reform social practice (Taylor 2000; Tennant 1997). This theory helps us understand volunteerism as a dialectical process that involves both self and society.

## Research design and procedure

This study employed a case-study approach to investigate older people's volunteer experiences from manifold angles and in their real-life context (Merriam 1998; Yin 1994). The data were collected from documents and through interviews and participant observation. The documents included government papers, *Statistics Canada* surveys, newspaper articles, and the publications of the national organisations that support small community agencies, such as *The United Way* and *Volunteer Canada*. The study began with the document analysis, and was followed by primary research in two phases between April 1999 and March 2000. Two sets of data were collected: a demographic and administrative overview of senior volunteers in Toronto's NPOs, and older people's personal stories of community volunteering.

Phase 1 involved the selection, using the organisational typology employed by a 1997 national survey (Statistics Canada 1998), of 12 well-known but diverse Toronto NPOs (Table 1). Religious and ethnic-oriented organisations were deliberately omitted to avoid factors that would construct 'community' in an exclusive sense. Two NPOs whose volunteers are exclusively seniors were included to compare their volunteer management

TABLE I. *Senior volunteers of 12 non-profit organisations in Toronto*

Type of organisation	Number of volunteers		Seniors as a percentage
	All ages	Seniors	
Social service for seniors	200	170	85.0
Child education	230	138	60.0
Human rights	24	9	37.5
Zoo	250	83	33.2
Hospital	110	28	25.4
Multi-domain	520	104	20.0
Adult education	65	9	13.8
Animal protection	75	10	13.3
Community health care	15	1	6.6
Food bank	270	10	3.7
Totals (excluding seniors' NPOs)	1,759	562	31.9
Seniors' talent bank	20	20	100.0
International development	50	50	100.0
Totals (including seniors' NPOs)	1,829	632	34.5

*Notes:* The number of volunteers does not include those serving on the board of directors. The last two organisations in the list are seniors' organisations.

with NPOs that draw from mixed age groups. A face-to-face interview of 60 to 90 minutes was conducted with the co-ordinator of the volunteers for each of the 12 organisations. The semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions on the characteristics of the senior volunteers, their organisation's administrative and recruitment strategies, their opinions about older volunteers, and the general problems confronting NPOs. Except for one new co-ordinator, all had had at least five years' experience in the organisation, and were between 25 and 53 years of age.<sup>1</sup>

In Phase 2, nine women and six men volunteers for the organisations were recruited by 'word of mouth' for face-to-face 'life story' interviews.<sup>2</sup> Their ages ranged from 55 to 93 years. Two participants had been 'full-time mothers', while others had followed various occupations, including sales-clerk, secretary, social worker, teacher, civil servant, corporate manager and executive, industrial chemist and librarian. Three (all aged in the fifties) had been volunteering for less than one year, four for two to 10 years, three for 15 to 30 years, and five for more than four decades. All had been volunteers at a number of NPOs, and at the time of the study were engaged with healthcare, adult education, youth development, cultural promotion, human rights and international development organisations, schools and the zoo, and in providing social services for women and seniors. Two participants had had major surgery (triple bypass and hip replacement), one had chronic arthritis and one a kidney disease. Six (one unmarried man and five widows) lived by themselves in their own house,

apartment or retirement residence. Except for one who had immigrated to Canada from Germany in her late-twenties, all had grown up in Canada and spoke English as their first language.

Each face-to-face interview was conducted at the interviewee's volunteer site (and, with consent, was followed by participant observation). It was loosely structured with open-ended questions, so that the participants could talk freely about why they began and continued to volunteer, and about their roles and the associated challenges, learning and changes. Each interview was tape-recorded, transcribed and returned to the participant for confirmation and editing.<sup>3</sup> Following Merriam's (1998) guideline for 'multiple qualitative case study analysis', each story was first analysed as a single case, by coding each transcript, episode by episode, to derive themes and categories. This was followed by a cross-case analysis to identify common themes, which were then compared with the themes and categories found in the document analysis and Phase 1 interviews.<sup>4</sup>

## Findings

### *Phase 1: the senior volunteers in the 12 organisations*

The interviews with the co-ordinators revealed that, following the national trend, the number of senior volunteers among the 12 NPOs had not increased during the previous five years (Statistics Canada 1998, 2001). The representation of seniors among all the volunteers working for the 12 Toronto NPOs was, however, higher (34.5%) than the national level (Table 1). Toronto's well-developed public transport system makes community volunteering accessible: as the co-ordinators observed, senior volunteers prefer using public transit and older people tend to choose an agency for its convenient location as well as its mission. Older Torontonians also take advantage of the sheer number of available NPOs. The senior volunteers in the 12 NPOs were mostly white, middle-class and spoke English as their first language, in strong contrast to the city's 'cultural mosaic' and the diversity of younger volunteers.

According to the co-ordinators' accounts and the author's observations, in none of the 12 NPOs was there intentional discrimination against older people in the screening and co-ordinating processes. The volunteers were treated equally and regardless of age for job and hours' assignments. All the co-ordinators praised the senior volunteers for their reliability and devotion, noting particularly their thorough understanding of the organisation's mission. Their long-term commitment was particularly appreciated, given the time and money that each NPO spends on recruiting and inducting volunteers. In the 12 NPOs, the average duration of an older

volunteers' involvement was longer (more than three years) than that of younger volunteers (three months to one year). The co-ordinators valued the older volunteers less for their instrumental skills than for their transferable skills, including their work ethic, patience, empathy, broad knowledge of social issues, and 'wisdom'. As one co-ordinator put it, 'the life experiences of older volunteers allow them to understand the complicated situations of the clients'.

Surprisingly, however, despite the co-ordinators' high praise for seniors, only two NPOs (besides the two seniors' organisations) showed an interest in the targeted recruitment of older volunteers, or planned long-term change in the level of older volunteers' involvement in their decision-making processes. Only two NPOs had formed a 'volunteer advisory committee' to mediate between volunteers and administrators. Only three co-ordinators mentioned negative features of older volunteers, and they included 'being a little too talkative' and 'trying to get too involved in the management of programmes'. A hospital social work co-ordinator found it difficult to deal with long-term committed 'old-old' volunteers, who 'had started to fray' but wouldn't admit it and withdraw. Such issues were by-products of the seniors' enthusiasm but raised difficult problems for the co-ordinators.

All the co-ordinators recognised the multiple and reciprocal motivations of their older volunteers. Most frequently mentioned were 'altruism', 'the availability of time', 'the desire to make a contribution', and 'the opportunity to socialise with others'. Few co-ordinators perceived 'the needs to learn skills' and 'the desire for self-development' as strong incentives: these needs were more often associated with younger volunteers who had an eye on their future careers. The co-ordinator of a seniors' talent bank mentioned, however, that seniors would quickly leave one NPO for another if they judged that their contribution to an organisation was meaningless in personal and social terms, another demonstration that they choose NPOs for the satisfaction they provide as well as their effectiveness in addressing social causes. This comment makes sense when one analyses the characteristics of the NPOs for which seniors have volunteered.

#### *Characteristics of the activities which attract older volunteers*

One interesting and unexpected finding was that the six NPOs (including two seniors' NPOs) that attracted many senior volunteers had common characteristics (Table 1). Only the two seniors' NPOs targeted older volunteers, but all had well developed volunteer programmes that attracted seniors for three reasons. First, they provided volunteers with a 'people-oriented' role, *e.g.* tutor, tour guide, public relations, story-teller, recruiter,

friendly visitor and mentor, that is kept separate from administrative work. Second, the roles make volunteers highly visible, by their direct contact with clients, which encourages volunteers to assume a high level of responsibility. The co-ordinators suggested that this was not a burden for the senior volunteers, for many had been accustomed to substantial responsibilities in their pre-retirement careers.

Third, the six NPOs provided new volunteers with well-organised intensive pre-training, followed by regular educational and social opportunities to update their knowledge of the social issues with which they deal, *e.g.* monthly meetings with guest speakers, workshops, and video and book libraries. These educational opportunities made volunteers more competent and less dependent on staff supervision, while expanding the roles that they could play. The co-ordinators also emphasised that regular educational and social opportunities helped create a sense of ‘community’, while improving the communication levels between staff and volunteers and among volunteers. The volunteers in these six NPOs contributed on average six to eight hours a week, significantly longer than in other organisations for which volunteers undertake miscellaneous office tasks (2–3 hours a week).

## Phase 2: the experiences of the 15 older volunteers

### *Volunteering as a generative activity*

The stories of the 15 volunteers confirmed that older adults volunteer for multiple reasons (Chappell and Prince 1997; Okun 1994; Okun, Barr and Herzog 1998; Snyder and Clary 2003). Following the two-factor model, these can be broadly divided into social (*i.e.* social obligation and altruism) and personal motivations (*i.e.* the desire to contribute one’s skills, to be socially active, to pursue one’s interests and convictions, and to manage increased free time) (Latting 1990; Wuthnow 1991). Although every participant referred to concerns for others and to society at large as motives for volunteering, no one uttered the words ‘social obligation’ or ‘altruism’. Instead they used expressions like ‘feel responsible’, ‘want to work for social causes’, or ‘want to give something back to the community’: four participants called this ‘pay-back time’ in retirement.

On closer examination, however, a slight difference in the objectives of older and younger participants was revealed. While participants aged in the fifties and sixties sought to recompense either previous generations or society at large for the benefits that they had received, those aged in the seventies or above more often referred to their obligations to future generations. Hannah (79 years), a ‘reader’ for immigrant children at a

neighbourhood school, expressed the view that ‘when you grow old, you should leave the world a better place’. Such a redirection of attention from the self to future generations implies a realisation of ‘generativity’ and ‘ego-integrity’ in late adulthood (Erikson 1985; Kotre 1984). This study cannot establish whether the shift resulted from their involvement in volunteering or from their ageing or life experiences.

It was evident, however, that all 15 participants used community volunteering to materialise their ‘generativity’ – as a developmental ‘challenge’ as well as a ‘need’ after mid-life (McAdams and Logan 2003). In this sense, the generative determination to leave a better world for following generations was not a pure altruistic or societal motive, but was intertwined with a narcissistic ‘desire for symbolic immortality’ (2003: 18), or their ‘desire to invest one’s substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self’ (Kotre 1984: 10).

The other motive mentioned by all the participants was the ‘desire to contribute their skills’. Although this is connected to social obligation, almost all participants mentioned that they wanted to contribute specific skills and knowledge that they perceived as their strength. For example, Patrick (aged 59 years), a former corporate manager and a volunteer speaker for a fraud-protection programme, explained that the reason he had chosen his NPO was to use his skills in public speaking and in organising people. Clearly, the ‘desire to contribute my skills’ overlaps with the need to keep feeling useful and for self-perceived competence to be socially validated (Okun 1994, Okun, Barr and Herzog 1998). This need was especially pressing among recent retirees who had, as Claudia (58 years) put it, ‘a fear of being left alone by society in retirement’. The participants used volunteering as a self-help strategy to sustain their sense of self and to cope with their ‘role of exclusion’ in society (Atchley 1999; Chappell 2001).

Despite their apparent opposition, the social and personal motives of the 15 participants were two sides of a coin, just as ‘generativity’ itself springs from both selfless and selfish desires. Perhaps this was why no participants used the words ‘social obligation’ and ‘altruism’, although those elements were encoded in their stories. Instead, they used an active construction, such as ‘want to pay back to society’, which indicated how much these personal psychosocial needs intrinsic to late adulthood were fulfilled by community volunteering; the expressions evince the generative and ‘repaying’ opportunities that volunteering provides.

### *Learning through community volunteering*

The 15 older volunteers indicated that once they became involved in community volunteering, they had continued, albeit not necessarily in the

same NPO. This is because they found it 'rewarding'; an important reward was 'continued learning'. Since they had not anticipated how much learning would be required, the benefit delighted them all the more. The contents of the learning can be dichotomised into 'integrative' and 'instrumental' knowledge and skills. The former includes inter-personal skills, leadership ability, and understanding differences in people and culture, while the latter involves practical knowledge about specific topics and technical skills. Inter-personal skills were especially appreciated, regardless of age, corroborating the results of the two national surveys. Helen, aged 93 years and a veteran board member of a women's organisation, depicted her learning experience this way:

Nothing is perfect. There are always dissatisfactions or complaints about being a member of the committee. Sometimes somebody will change your opinion even though you think you never will change it. But that's the way policy is formed. I think I've grown in my appreciation of other people and their points of view. I think that I learned to listen to other people's opinions. But I've also learned how to influence other people to accept my opinion.

Since there is no ceiling to the art of human relationships, even veteran volunteers experience a sense of continual learning and self-growth through their volunteer activities. Older and longer-term volunteers placed more value on this implicit type of 'integrative' knowledge and skills than the more quantifiable kinds. At the same time, the participants also described the joy of learning new 'instrumental' knowledge and skills. It not only made them more effective volunteers, it provided them with the confidence that they could still master new things and with a sense of self-growth. The types of learning most often mentioned in the participants' stories were informal, interactive and problem-solving sessions at volunteer sites. Patty, a former sales-clerk aged 70 years and volunteer president at a nursing home, called her volunteer site a 'community of learning' and characterised the learning process as follows:

We do learn a lot of things from volunteering here. We learn something new every day, for example, some of the elderly folks have sicknesses and you learn what to do and not to do for them. I have to deal with family members too. They come to ask me, 'What should I do in this case and what should I do in that case?' Because no family is the same, you have to sort of solve it or talk to them differently, and learn what to do when the same incident comes up again.

Like Patty, most participants valued the experiential 'trial-and-error' types of learning needed to solve concrete problems. They appreciated the challenges posed by their volunteer roles, and believed that the stimulation kept them mentally active. Even the one-in-three of the research participants who had health problems found that volunteering provided a source

of confidence that they were still healthy and capable of solving problems (their perception might not have matched reality). For those who didn't have serious problems, volunteering appeared to be regarded as health insurance.

The participants who worked in a team emphasised that the learning process was accelerated by 'everyone scratching each other's back', as Roy (aged 65 years) put it, but admitted that working collaboratively was often stressful. The 15 participants' stories disclosed that, while community volunteering was basically rewarding, it was not always frustration-free. It forced older adults, who tended to think a familiar framework was best, to compromise and work with others, of different backgrounds and who used different approaches, to deal with problems in unfamiliar fields, and to give up time even when busy. The process is comparable with the procedure of transformative learning (Mezirow 1991, 1994; Taylor 2000; Tennant 1993). The inner conflict in volunteering functions as the 'disorienting dilemma', and this provokes 'self-examination', 'critical reflection', 'exploring and planning new roles' and 'negotiating relationships', all of which are steps towards the 'transformation of frame of mind' (Mezirow 1994, 2000). Such learning is holistic (Taylor 2000): the emotions engendered through participants' interaction with clients, fellow volunteers, and staff – joy, compassion, affection, sorrow and anger – paradoxically seemed to play a crucial role in fostering their rational and critical thinking.

The main outcomes of learning perceived by all participants were 'heightened self-awareness' and 'perspective and behaviour change', including new insights and new ways of dealing with themselves, their organisations and the community at large, although many emphasised that none of these had happened overnight. Volunteering helped them understand themselves better through provoking such personal questions as 'what I want to do', 'what I really care about' and 'who I want to be'. As Margo (aged 80 years) put it, 'When you volunteer, you bring your whole background with you, your whole approach to life'. Community volunteering for older people involves the whole person in both retrospective and prospective ways, which clearly helps them achieve self-integration in late adulthood (Erikson 1985). The participants' accounts also implied that the self-directed non-coercive nature of volunteering and the feeling of freedom, *i.e.* 'I can quit if I don't like it', made easier their 'search for themselves'.

The participants' straightforward criticisms and constructive complaints about their NPOs were also seen as fruit of their learning. 'The loss of the grass-roots spirit of community volunteering' was especially criticised by long-term older volunteers, while younger volunteers voiced their

frustration with ‘the lack of opportunity for input into the programmes’ in which they were engaged. Together, these criticisms are clear reactions to the rarity of consultation mechanisms by which volunteers’ voices could be heard and could influence programme development (as found in Phase 1).

Regarding new insights about society at large, all participants, regardless of the duration of their volunteering, mentioned the elevated ‘sense of community’ that resulted from their realisation of the vast needs of society. By witnessing the direct impact of their voluntary contributions, they were convinced that ‘community support through the collaboration of its members is inevitable’. Crystal, a former social worker aged 69 years and a hospital volunteer for more than 10 years, said:

Volunteers are all over the hospital. Literally, the hospital cannot function without us. While I’m at the hospital, I hear about all the changes that are going on, and I cannot stand the current Conservative government. I’m actually in the hospital, seeing the effects of all their cuts on staff, on patients, so I want to agitate or advocate. I wrote letters to my MP, I can phone them, too. Because I’ve got first-hand information, not just from what I’m reading or watching on TV.

Interestingly, as one can see in Crystal’s account, many participants talked not only about the new perspectives that volunteers gain but also about consequential actions. What started as a primarily ideological and selfish social obligation, *i.e.* the desire ‘to pay back to society’, through direct involvement, was gradually transformed into a more realistic community consciousness, *i.e.* the ‘need to work together to sustain our community’.

## Discussion

Two themes emerged from the findings that provide answers to the initial questions about the conditions of volunteerism among seniors in NPOs, namely, older adults’ lived experiences in community volunteering, and the organisational and structural supports which promote seniors’ greater participation in formal volunteering. It is possible that the high (34.5) percentage of older people among the participant volunteers in the 12 Toronto NPOs resulted from selection bias. Nevertheless, it is clear that pragmatic factors, *e.g.* accessibility to public transportation, the number of NPOs to choose from, the differences in languages and culture, which are external to the organisation have a strong influence on the high rate of seniors’ participation in Toronto.

It was puzzling why only two of the 10 NPOs (besides the two seniors’ organisations) displayed an interest in promoting the recruitment and deployment of older volunteers, despite the praise of their contributions and complaints about the general shortage and turnover of volunteers. Nor did

they plan a long-term increase in older volunteers' involvement in programme development, despite the evident enthusiasm for this role. Such organisational indifference suggests lingering institutionalised ageism, in a form not apparent as discrimination against individual older people, but still deeply embedded in the organisational or social psychology (Minkler and Cole 1999).

This study of older volunteers in Toronto has indicated that they can be effective service providers if society creates the structures that allow them to express and cultivate their 'generativity' and their desire to 'pay back' through social contributions. Friedan (1993: 619) advocated that 'generativity is expressed in more mundane terms whenever [senior citizens'] talents are truly used as a community resource, or where they are allowed or encouraged to use their wisdom in work with younger people'. Unfortunately, however, apart from their role as grandparents, most societies still do not support older people's generative inclination to work with younger generations, despite this activity's link with successful ageing (Fisher 1995; McAdams and Logan 2003). It is therefore important for NPOs to see retirees as an untapped community resource and as part of the solution to their problems of recruitment and effectiveness.

Having said that, the findings have revealed gaps between the idealistic expectations of older people and what NPOs actually offer volunteers. As the hospital co-ordinator revealed, it is difficult to persuade long-term older volunteers to slow down or withdraw when their health declines. Furthermore, given the increasing legal and fiduciary responsibilities and pressures for greater 'performance accountability' (Scott 2003), it is impossible that volunteers become the 'brains and muscle of NPOs', as Ernest, a former chief executive officer of a large corporation, expected. When it is impossible to adapt a role to allow an older volunteer to continue, then a plan to assess and support them is required. Providing a 'trial period', during which new volunteers can adjust their expectations about what an NPO can actually offer, would also reduce frustrations on both sides.

Given that there are tightly inter-woven altruistic and egotistic motivations for volunteering, it is clear that NPOs need to provide a 'motivational pay-check' (Scheier 1980), an equivalent to the material and tangible benefits of paid work. This means that NPOs should strive to involve older volunteers in a 'meaningful' volunteer experience, one that gives them a sense of social contribution and self-growth (Chappell 2001). Older volunteers' positive reactions to learning experiences evince the value of programmes that utilise people-oriented skills through direct interaction with clients, fellow volunteers and staff. Problem-solving roles and the training, educational and learning opportunities provided

by well-organised NPOs are found challenging but meaningful by older volunteers.

The stories of the 15 older volunteers demonstrate that community volunteering transforms older people into more active and committed community members who are willing to participate in community development (Rifkin 1995; Salamon 1994). So as not to treat them merely as a low-cost substitute for paid workers, or to do no more than make up for the failures of governments and the private sector in the welfare and social service fields, NPOs should foster 'transformative learning' among their volunteers. When an NPO connects the learning capabilities of its individual volunteers to the needs of the community in more innovative ways, its accountability, efficiency and competitiveness in the non-profit market will be raised (Watkins and Marsick 1993). In the long run, this is the kind of reciprocity that should exist between volunteers and NPOs.

The interviews with the 12 co-ordinators showed, however, that the NPOs ability to organise 'meaningful' volunteer programmes with educational opportunities depended heavily on funding. Tight budgets were the biggest obstacle to improving the quality of the volunteer programmes. Unfortunately, currently there is no indication that Canadian governments will invest substantial resources in NPOs (Chappell 2001). Although they envisage volunteerism as a way to capitalise the resources offered by older people and to provide them with social roles, no concrete structural support is available. The public debate about society's responses to the ageing population should look beyond support for the debilitated elderly, and develop more strategic community-based interventions that promote positive and productive later lives.

## **Conclusion**

Given the qualitative approach, the findings of this study do not support generalisations for Canada and beyond. The 15 older people who related their experiences are not a cross-section of the older Canadian population but a purposive sample of the less than one-fifth who engage in the studied form of voluntary citizen participation, namely, 'high generative adults' who try to satisfy both 'agentic motives' and 'communion motives' through community volunteering (McAdams and Logan 2003: 18). Additional research would be necessary to establish whether the generative 'pay back' principle recounted by the participants is common among Canadian retirees, or limited to the middle-class older people who volunteer.

The trend towards early retirement and the ageing of the 'baby boomers' suggest that in the future conditions will change (Chappell 2001;

Gower 1997), although the domination of market economy principles and of the youth-oriented culture will continue to make it difficult to see retirees as productive. Given that our ageing, service-oriented, post-modern society has declining welfare supports, it is important that the concept of ‘productivity’ is extended beyond narrowly conceived contributions to production and the economy, and into the domains of social and moral economy. The value of what older people provide through community volunteering – time, helping hands, care, compassion and social commitment – is hard to measure but a vital ingredient of caring and inter-dependent communities. What older volunteers gain through community volunteering – a sense of autonomy and self-worth, continual learning and development, an active and positive life-style and support networks – improves both the lives of older adults and society at large. Productively deploying more seniors in community volunteering would enlarge the range of possible outcomes of an ageing society.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the participants of this study for their generous collaboration, and my colleagues and the reviewers for their thorough and constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

### NOTES

- 1 All interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The co-ordinators’ answers were then reorganised and tabulated to identify and compare patterns across the 12 NPOs.
- 2 Seven participants were introduced by acquaintances, six by the coordinators, and two were colleague volunteers at a nursing home. Four were aged 50–59 years, four aged 60–69 years, five were aged in the seventies, one in the eighties, and one in the nineties.
- 3 Eleven volunteers allowed me to observe their interaction with other volunteers, clients, and volunteer co-ordinators for 45 to 60 minutes after the interview. The filed notes and the photographs taken during the observations served as supplementary materials by which to confirm the participants’ stories.
- 4 Themes and categories were displayed in a mind-map to clarify the inter-relations. To monitor the process of analysis, a ‘reflexive journal’ was maintained (Cole and Knowles 2001), and two colleagues provided ‘peer examination’ by commenting on my findings as they emerged (Merriam 1998).

### References

- Atchley, R. C. 1999. *Continuity and Adaptation in Aging: Creating Positive Experiences*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland.
- Bowen, P. 1997. Exploration of public issues in the United States, Canada, and beyond. *Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 14, 4, 1–4.

- Chappell, N. L. 2001. Canadian Social Policy and Ageing. Paper presented for the Canada-Japan Social Policy Research Project organised by the Asian Pacific Foundation of Canada, June 24, Osaka, Japan.
- Chappell, N. L. and Prince, M. J. 1997. Reasons why Canadian seniors volunteer. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, **16**, 2, 336–53.
- Clary, E. G. and Snyder, M. 1991. A functional analysis of altruism and prosocial behavior: the case of volunteerism. *Review of Personality and Social Psychology*, **123**, 119–48.
- Cole, A. L. and Knowles, J. G. 2001. *Lives-in-Context: The Art of Life History Research*. Alta Mira, Walnut Creek, California.
- Danoff, A. and Kopel, S. 1994. What are the motivational needs behind volunteer work? *Journal of Volunteer Administration*, Summer, 13–8.
- Erikson, E. H. 1985. *Childhood and Society*. W. W. Norton, New York.
- Fisher, B. J. 1995. Successful aging, life satisfaction, and generativity in later life. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, **41**, 3, 239–50.
- Friedan, B. 1993. *The Fountain of Age*. Simon and Schuster, New York.
- Gower, D. 1997. Meaning the age of retirement. *Perspectives* (Statistics Canada, Ottawa), Summer, 11–7.
- Hedley, R. and Smith, J. D. (eds) 1992. *Volunteering and Society: Principles and Practice*. Bedford Square Press, London.
- Hendricks, J. and Leedham, C. A. 1991. Dependency or empowerment? Toward a moral and political economy of aging. In Minkler, M. and Estes, C. L. (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Aging: The Political and Moral Economy of Growing Old*. Baywood, Amityville, New York, 51–64.
- Kotre, J. N. 1984. *Outliving the Self: Generativity and the Interpretation of Lives*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland.
- Latting, J. K. 1990. Motivational differences between Black and White volunteers. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, **19**, 121–35.
- Lohmann, R. A. 1992. *The Commons: New Perspectives on Nonprofit Organization and Voluntary Action*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Marshall, V. W. 1994. *Ageing: Canadian Perspectives*. Broadview, Peterborough, Ontario.
- McAdams, D. P. and Logan, R. L. 2003. What is generativity? In de St. Aubin, E., McAdams, D. P. and Kim, T.-C. (eds), *The Generative Society: Caring for Future Generations*. American Psychological Association, Washington DC, 15–31.
- Merriam, S. B. 1998. *Qualitative Research and Case Study Application in Education: Revised and Expanded from Case Study Research in Education*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Mezirow, J. 1991. *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Mezirow, J. 1994. Understanding transformative theory. *Adult Education Quarterly*, **44**, 4, Summer, 222–32.
- Mezirow, J. 2000. Learning to think like an adult: core concepts of transformative theory. In Mezirow, J. (eds), *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 3–33.
- Minkler, M. 1991. Overview. In Minkler, M. and Estes, C. L. (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Aging: the Political and Moral Economy of Growing Old*. Baywood, Amityville, New York, 3–17.
- Minkler, M. and Cole, T. R. 1999. Political and moral economy: getting to know one another. In Minkler, M. and Estes, C. L. (eds), *Critical Gerontology: Perspectives from Political and Moral Economy*. Baywood, Amityville, New York, 37–49.
- Norland, J. A. 1994. *Profile of Canada's Seniors*. Report 96-312E, Ministry of Industry, Science and Technology, Statistics Canada, Ottawa.
- Novac, M. 1993. *Ageing and Society: A Canadian Perspective*. Second edition, Nelson, Scarborough, Ontario.
- Okun, M. A. 1994. The relation between motives for organizational volunteering and frequency of volunteering by elders. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, **13**, 2, 115–26.

- Okun, M. A., Barr, A. and Herzog, A. R. 1998. Motivation to volunteer by older adults: a test of competing measurement models. *Psychology and Aging*, **13**, 4, 608–21.
- Quarter, J. 1992. *Canada's Social Economy: Co-operatives, Non-profits, and Other Community Enterprises*. James Lorimer, Toronto.
- Rifkin, J. 1995. *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*. G. P. Putnum, New York.
- Riley M. W. and Riley Jr J. W. 1994. Structural lag: past and future. In Riley, M. W., Kahn, R. L. and Forner, A. (eds), *Age and Structural Lag: Society's Failure to Provide Meaningful Opportunities in Work, Family, and Leisure*. Wiley-Interscience, New York, 15–36.
- Salamon, L. M. 1994. The rise of the nonprofit sector. *Foreign Affairs*, July/August. **73**, 4, 109–22.
- Salamon, L. M. 2003. *The Resilient Sector: The State of Nonprofit America*. Brookings Institution, Washington DC.
- Scheier, I. H. 1980. *Exploring Volunteer Space: The Recruiting of a Nation*. Volunteer: The National Centre for Citizen Involvement, Washington DC.
- Scott, K. 2003. *Funding Matters: Summary Report of the Impact of Canada's New Funding Regime on Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations*. Canadian Council on Social Development, Ottawa.
- Snyder, M. and Clary, G. 2003. Volunteerism and the generative society. In de St. Aubin, E., McAdams, D. P. and Kim, T-C. (eds), *The Generative Society: Caring for Future Generations*. American Psychological Association, Washington DC, 221–37.
- Statistics Canada 1998. *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 1998 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*. Report 71-542-XPW, Minister of Industry, Ottawa.
- Statistics Canada 2000. Voluntary organizations in Ontario in the 1990s. *Information and Insights for the Nonprofit Sector: Building a Knowledge Base*. Report 75F0033MIE, 1, Minister of Industry, Ottawa.
- Statistics Canada 2001. *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*. Report 71-542-XPE, Minister of Industry, Ottawa.
- Taylor, E. 2000. Analyzing research on transformative learning theory. In Mezirow, J. (ed.), *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 285–328.
- Tennant, M. C. 1993. Perspective transformation and adult development. *Adult Education Quarterly*, **44**, 1, Fall, 34–42.
- Tennant, M. C. 1997. *Psychology and Adult Learning*. Second edition, Routledge, New York.
- Watkins, K. E. and Marsick, V. J. 1993. *Sculpting the Learning Organization: Lessons in the Art and Science of Systemic Change*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Wuthnow, R. 1991. *Act of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.
- Yin, R. K. 1994. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Second edition, Sage, Thousand Oaks, California.

*Accepted 18 January 2004*

*Address for correspondence:*

Miya Narushima,  
Asian Institute, Munk Centre for International Studies,  
University of Toronto,  
1 Devonshire Place, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3K7, Canada.

E-mail: miya.narushima@utoronto.ca