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Volunteering as Meaning-Making in the Transition to Retirement

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the volunteer experience of older adults is of critical importance to the nonprofit and voluntary sector, and society. Research suggests that volunteering is a way individuals derive meaning through the complex interactions that make up measures of self-worth, community concept, and identity. This study explores the meaning of volunteering in the lives of adults over the age of 60 as they transition into retirement. Analysis revealed four primary themes: role identity; confronting ageing, health, and dying; fear/anxiety about transitioning to retirement; and making a difference. Further analysis based on whether retirement was planned or not revealed important differences in the ways that meaning was made. The findings reveal suggestions for improvements in the recruitment and retention of the older volunteer segment in nonprofit organizations.

RÉSUMÉ

Comprendre l'expérience de bénévolat des personnes âgées est d'une importance cruciale pour le secteur bénévole et communautaire. Le bénévolat est un moyen pour les individus de trouver un sentiment d'identité grâce aux interactions complexes de l'estime de soi, communauté, et de l'identité. Cette étude explore la signification du bénévolat dans la vie des adultes de plus de 60 ans, lors de leur transition vers la retraite. L'analyse a révélé quatre thèmes principaux: l'identité; faire face au vieillissement; l'anxiété face à la transition à la retraite; et faire une différence. Si la retraite était prévue ou non a révélé des différences significatives. Les résultats offrent un aperçu unique de l'expérience des volontaires âgés et révèlent des suggestions d'amélioration du recrutement et de la rétention du segment des volontaires âgés.

Keywords / Mots clés Bénévole; Retraite; Les aînés; Sentiment d'identité; Transition / Volunteer; Retirement; Older adults; Meaning-making; Transition

INTRODUCTION

In Canada, the number of people transitioning into retirement is at an all-time high (Statistics Canada, 2015). These individuals are moving out of full-time working roles and into one of the many iterations of retirement—a time replete with fundamental changes to their way of life (Denton & Spencer, 2009). As a greater number of individuals retire, Canada



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and other developed countries are faced with many associated challenges, including growing pressure on social assistance and government-held pension systems (Weaver, 2004), as well as an increased load on public healthcare systems (Canadian Institute of Health Information, 2014; Komp, van Tilburg, & van Groenou, 2012). However, alongside these challenges are also opportunities for communities and organizations. One of the most relevant opportunities for the non-profit sector is the potential for a larger and increasingly healthy older adult volunteer force (Griffin & Hesketh, 2008; Kaskie, Imhof, Cavanaugh, & Culp, 2008; Tang, 2015).

A growing body of research demonstrates that many adults over 60 have personal and civic commitments within their communities and more free time than earlier in their careers/lives—factors that have been linked to a desire and commitment to volunteer (Einolf, 2009; Kelly & Harding, 2004). Older Canadians are volunteering in large numbers, with about 41 percent of Canadians aged 55 to 64 and 36 percent of Canadians 65 and older giving their time (Vézina & Crompton, 2012), a number that is particularly important now given that there are more Canadians over 65 than under 15 (Statistics Canada, 2015). These individuals may be well-suited for leadership and administrative roles, as well as programmatic or operational roles in areas of niche expertise (Mutchler, Burr, & Caro, 2003), given the breadth of life and work experiences they have had. Even with growing bodies of literature on experiences of ageing, quality of life indicators, and volunteer recruitment and retention, very little research has explored volunteering with community-based nonprofits through the transition to retirement (i.e., partially retired or newly retired within five years).

As older adults face transitions in occupation, sense of self, personal relationships, and other factors for successful ageing (Reichstadt, Sengupta, Depp, Palinkas, & Jeste, 2010), making sense of their individual experience and personal significance becomes critical to their own well-being. The construct of meaning-making (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998) offers a useful lens to understand choices related to and the impact of volunteering in community-based nonprofits by older adults. Meaning-making has a stronger focus on positive outcomes and benefits (e.g., Narushima, 2005; Schnell & Hoof, 2012), where previous work using role theory has been largely focused on the loss and re-establishment of identity (e.g., Chambré, 1984, 1993). In this study, the notion of being in transition from working to retirement is pivotal, as this phase of life is focused on significant social, economic, and lifestyle changes (Chambré, 1993; Einolf, 2009; Lancee & Radl, 2012), however, there is little research that explores the effects of these changes in the context of volunteering. Further, qualitative research designed to elicit the stories and experiences of older adult volunteers within the community-based nonprofit context is also sparse (Misener, Doherty, & Hamm-Kerwin, 2010). The current study seeks to help fill some of these important gaps in the nonprofit management literature.

Among community-based nonprofits in particular, which rely on volunteers to serve in all capacities, understanding those factors that influence individuals' experience and retention as volunteers is paramount to the sustainability of the sector, as well as the well-being of the volunteers. As such, the purpose of the study was to understand how older adults made meaning through volunteering during the transition from paid work to retirement, and how this affects the nature of their volunteer involvement. The central research question guiding the study was: what role does the volunteer experience play in meaning-making during the transition to retirement among older adults?

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Meaning-making

In order to understand the role of volunteering in the transition to retirement, this article draws on existing theories of meaning-making. Research on meaning and meaning-making appears across a variety of disciplines with a broad range of understandings, including health research (e.g., Parkinson, Warburton, Sibbritt, & Byles, 2010), feminist studies (e.g., Rakow, 2015), business and industry studies (e.g., Lowe, Rod, Hwang, Johnston, & Johnston, 2016), and religious studies

(e.g., Page, 2015), among other fields. For the purpose of the current study, the concept of meaning-making is drawn from the fields of positive and social psychology and the work of Susan Nolen-Hoeksema and Christopher Davis (2001) (see also Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 2002). As such, meaning-making can be understood as the complex interactions of personal needs and desires that make up an individual's measures of self-worth, community concept, and the way they identify as a person. This complex interaction of individual and social self-concepts tries to answer questions such as: Who am I? What is my place in the world? Why do I matter? This conceptualization is framed by Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson's (1998) two construals of meaning, where meaning is derived from *benefit-finding* (where meaning is about significance) and *sense-making* (where meaning is about the comprehensibility of situations and settings). These constructs are a particularly useful way to understand individual experience and the development of existential and personal significance through life experience.

The sense-making construct of meaning-making is further informed by the work of Adam Theron and Linda Theron (2014), who explain that while meaning-making is inherently an intrapersonal process, it is also contextualized to the individual and their cultural setting. Individuals faced with major life changes look for a place for the self in a changed world as a way to gain perspective on major life changes, something that has been explored extensively in psychological research on illness and dying (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). The same is true for recent retirees, who are seeking to contextualize their new roles by making sense of their new space and place. Tatjana Schnell and Matthias Hoof (2012) highlighted that meaning-making as a function of volunteering is generally absent from the literature and could be applied in order to better understand personal meaning and a sense of self among volunteers. Yoshitaka Iwasaki, Emily Messina, John Shank, and Catherine Coyle (2015) explored leisure in meaning-making for adults with mental illness and found cognitive and social benefits in volunteer work. Similarly, Heather Porter, Iwasaki, and Shank (2010) identified benefits related to identity expression, freedom, and social connections derived from volunteering. Thus, focusing on the processes of benefit-finding and sense-making within the transition to retirement allows for deeper understandings of the meaning-making process in this pivotal stage of life.

Retirement

Retirement and its associated changes in lifestyle have come to form an essential part of our understanding of life stages in North America (Denton & Spencer, 2009). Retirement can be defined as the withdrawal from paid working life, with sufficient resources to support one's self (with or without state subsidy) until death (Denton & Spencer, 2009). In Frank Denton and Byron Spencer's definition, the withdrawal from paid occupation is far from smooth, necessarily complex, and can have multiple transitions in and out of paid work. It is important to note that retirement is not always tied to age (McMahon & MacQueen, 2014), although in Canada, 65 years of age is when individuals are eligible for full retirement pension benefits from the government (Government of Canada, 2015).

Despite formalized pension processes, retirement is not always a linear process of moving from a full working life to complete retirement (Denton & Spencer, 2009). Some individuals may remain employed at a different or reduced capacity for a period of time, or seek out other employment after ending their career work (Griffin & Hesketh, 2008; Kim & Feldman, 2000). Regardless of the circumstances of the transition, the perception exists that retired individuals possess more free/leisure time, with increased choice over time-use activities (Einolf, 2009; Nimrod, 2007a; Rosenkoetter, Gams, & Engdahl, 2001). So entrenched is this idea that it dominates advertising and business strategies for companies associated with retirement (e.g., Freedom55, 2015). Retirement for many is a negotiation of the various role responsibilities that remain in the absence of work life, such as household work, social obligations, family care, and community involvement (Blanchard-Fields, Solinge, & Henkens, 2008; Rosenkoetter et al., 2001), as well as financial responsibilities, including living on a lower income, lifespan budgeting, the higher costs of medical and other living expenses, and social pressures among friends and family (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2009; Mutchler et al., 2003). Additional expectations for civic participation,

or the perception of increased availability to help neighbours and friends, also exists for older adults (McDonald, 1995; Nancy Morrow-Howell, 2007).

Some scholars have explored the different ways that older adults use their time after retirement, and in particular the roles that non-work activities play in the use of that time. Galit Nimrod (2007a, 2007b) and colleagues (Janke, Nimrod, & Kleiber, 2008), have looked extensively at the use of leisure time in retirees, and the links to perceived well-being. Exploring aspects of innovation theory, Nimrod and Douglas Kleiber (2007) showed that adding new activities after retirement is uncommon, yet those who did add new activities experienced a positive effect on well-being. Nimrod and Amit Shriram (2016) showed both an increase in the quality of life of highly involved individuals, and a reduction of quality of life in individuals with very low activity after retirement. Drawing from this literature on older adult leisure, scholars have shown that volunteering can be a tangible use of time and intellectual capital (Hong, Morrow-Howell, Tang, & Hinterlong, 2009; Misener, Doherty, & Hamm-Kerwin, 2010), and there are many avenues for its application and examination in the nonprofit literature.

Older adult volunteers

Similar to retirement, volunteering has been defined in many subtly different ways within the literature. Statistics Canada defines a volunteer as “A person aged 15 and over who did any activities without pay on behalf of a group or organization, at least once in the 12 months preceding the survey. This includes any unpaid help provided to schools, religious organizations, sports or community associations” (Vézina & Crompton, 2012, p. 38). This effort on behalf of organizations or groups is considered formal volunteering and can be contrasted with a less structured, sometimes less recognized type of informal volunteering, which often takes place within close communities and would include actions such as checking on neighbours or doing childcare (Lancee & Radl, 2012). Previous research has shown that older adult volunteers engage in both formal and informal volunteering (Tang, 2015). This section reviews key facts of the volunteer experience for older adults in order to build a foundation for the further review of meaning-making in this population.

Research on older adults' motivations for volunteering is extensive and demonstrates the diverse motives for engaging in this pursuit in later life. While not the central focus for the current investigation, an awareness of volunteer motivation can be useful as a backdrop to any investigation related to the experience of meaning-making in a given pursuit (Clary & Snyder, 1999). Various models have been developed to account for older adult volunteer motivation, and Morris Okun, Alicia Barr, and A. Regula Herzog's (1998) evaluation of them demonstrated the complexity and interactive nature of those motivations. Various elements promote volunteering among older adults, including access to personal resources (Principi, Schippers, Naegele, Di Rosa, & Lamura, 2016), positive self-image (Griffin & Hesketh, 2008), and ease of access (Tang & Morrow-Howell, 2008), among others. Lona Choi (2003) also demonstrated that when older adults volunteer they benefit from positive self-worth, which may encourage further civic involvement. Also, older adults are often compelled to volunteer through religious affiliation. Neal Krause (2015), among others, explored how involvement in religious organizations is a major factor in the motivation of older adults to volunteer in religious settings and beyond. Helen Ebaugh, Paula Pipes, Janet Chafetz, and Martha Daniels (2003) also explored how religion was situated in civic involvement, and how the work of religious organizations could be distinguished from secular organizations when engaging in volunteer labour.

Research on the topic of health and well-being in volunteering is extensive, and it generally demonstrates the positive effects of volunteering in retirement on older adults. Ronald Jirovec and Christine Hyduk (1999) explored whether the type and duration of volunteering had an effect on psychological well-being in older adults and showed that it did. Miya Narushima (2005) argued that the learning and transformative structures in volunteering allow older adults to maintain well-being and self-esteem. Lynne Parkinson, Jeni Warburton, David Sibbritt, and Julie Byles (2010) showed how both psychological and physical health factors affected participation and self-rated well-being in volunteer activities by older women. Nimrod's work (2007b, 2008; Kleiber & Nimrod, 2009), has also made important contributions to this literature,

showing that well-being is positively associated with leisure participation, and that this increases with age. Hanna van Solinge and Kène Henkens (2007) showed that the social environment also influences the life satisfaction and well-being of retirees, and that the social transitions in family and work relationships while moving into retirement were vital to maintaining life satisfaction. Marieke van Willigen (2000) also explored the effects of volunteering across the life course, and showed that volunteering in later life had positive effects on health and well-being, and potentially delayed mortality.

Literature in the area of older volunteer behaviour broadly examines the factors that impact the actions of the volunteers themselves or proposes models of volunteer behaviour. Norah Peters-Davis, Christopher Burant, and Heidi Braunschweig (2001) presented a multidimensional model of volunteer behaviour that includes structural, cultural, personality, and situational factors as central facets of older adult volunteer behaviour. Shannon Hamm-Kerwin, Katie Misener, and Alison Doherty (2009) apply this model in the nonprofit context, providing evidence of its applicability in the community-sport organization context and its utility as a multidimensional model for explaining the behavioural choices of older adult volunteers. In their meta-analysis, Elisabeth Godbout, Johanne Filiatrault, and Michelle Plante (2012) identify positive and negative effects on older adult volunteer engagement, including person-linked elements, such as personal values, age, and gender; environmental factors, including physical access and social connections; and occupation-linked factors, including work-similarity. In each of the categories identified in the meta-analysis, as well as earlier modelling work, volunteers were able to use their volunteering experience to make sense of new roles (e.g., sense of personhood or personality), or find new benefits through this form of civic engagement (e.g., novel positive social and environmental spaces).

Although research on the topic of health and well-being through volunteering for older adults is extensive (see Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Kahana, Bhatta, Lovegreen, Kahana, & Midlarsky, 2013; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003; Narushima, 2005; Okun et al., 1998; Windsor, Anstey, & Rodgers, 2008), studies that explore older adults focus primarily on three things: influences on mortality, overall well-being, and how specific experiences affect health outcomes for older adults. For example, Alex Harris and Carl Thoresen (2005) showed that consistent volunteering significantly reduced mortality, an obvious benefit to those individuals facing advanced ageing. These studies, along with those cited previously by Nimrod and colleagues (Janke, Nimrod, & Kleiber, 2008; Nimrod 2007a, 2007b; Nimrod & Kleiber 2007; Nimrod and Shrira 2016), demonstrate that volunteering offers obvious and direct benefits to older adults, and that leveraging those benefits may help older adults experience greater meaning in an important part of the life course.

Using meaning-making as a lens on the volunteer experiences of older adults transitioning to retirement sheds light on, through sense-making and benefit-finding, the unique aspects of this experience and allows for comparison with previously researched understandings of retirement experiences, behaviours, and outcomes. This offers an important contribution for community-based nonprofit organizations seeking to involve older adults and ensure the volunteer experience is meaningful as they transition to retirement.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an interpretive qualitative methodology whereby the researchers sought to inductively explore and understand the socially constructed meaning people derive from their experience of volunteering. The study also draws on constructivist data collection and analysis techniques (see Charmaz, 2006). This approach was chosen because no framework exists to date that has examined the volunteer experience specifically during the transition to retirement within the nonprofit context. As such, the researchers were mindful of prior literature on older adult volunteering in general (e.g., during retirement), as well as the literature on meaning-making, while being open to new themes and theorizing that can emerge from the “ground up” (Charmaz, 2006). Neither theory nor data are discovered as raw, unaffected, and void of researcher influence. Kathy Charmaz (2000) further argues that in this type of qualitative investigation, the researcher

cannot be objective in the collection and analysis of data; previous experience and expertise will always be a lens through which the researcher frames, collects, interprets, and analyzes data.

Participants were drawn from the population of older adults engaged in ongoing volunteering in community-based nonprofits in two mid-size cities in southern Ontario, Canada, during the spring of 2016. For the purposes of this study, “older adult in transition to retirement” was defined as adults over 60 years of age, who retired within the last five years, or who were actively in the process of leaving the workforce for retirement. Participants were habitual/continual volunteers (regular roles where they averaged more than five hours per month), and were involved with secular community-based not-for-profit organizations. The study was narrowed to secular organizations, given prior research noting that those who volunteer exclusively in faith-based settings may be doing so because of specific motives and normative expectations tied to religious affiliation, and may experience different benefits and/or constraints (e.g., Becker & Dhingra, 2001; Ebaugh et al., 2003). The researchers identified two public community databases that listed voluntary organizations within the two focal communities and sent recruitment letters to the chair or executive directors of all listed organizations across those databases ($N = 27$), inviting them to forward the recruitment letter to older adults within their organizations. Through this procedure, 12 older adults responded to the researchers directly and were willing to participate; they held a variety of volunteer commitments, from newcomer-services volunteering to administrative work. These initial participants also identified others through snowball sampling. Together, 15 older adult volunteers participated in the study, including 10 women and five men. All participants were between the ages of 60 and 70. See Table 1 for other demographic information and volunteer roles.

Table 1: Participant Demographics and Information

Name	Age-range	Gender	# of years since retirement	Main work	Current volunteer role(s)	Volunteer before retirement
HA	60-65	F	5	Manager, local business	Front desk	Yes
DK	60-65	M	3	University administration	Driver	Yes
LM	60-65	F	2.5	NFP management	Hospice	Yes
RL	65-70	F	>1	Therapist	Refugee/Child care	Yes
BJ	60-65	F	1	Crown corporation	Care of under-homed	Yes
ML	60-65	F	1	Sales	Literacy	Yes
WE	65-70	F	1	Sales	Tutor/Driver	No
JP	60-65	M	4	Computers	Photo	Yes
VM	60-65	F	>1	Coach	Community centre	No
DA	65-70	M	5	Teacher	Child care/Refugee	No
CM	60-65	M	2	Teacher	Trails/Theatre	Yes
HE	65-70	F	4	Clerical	Clerical/Local council	No
GD	65-70	M	>5	Sales	Local theatre	Yes
CJ	65-70	F	3	Administrator	Child care/Suicide awareness	No
MB	65-70	F	5	Teacher	Coordinate community dementia project	Yes

Data were collected through in-depth one-on-one interviews with an open, semi-structured format beginning with a single standardized question (“Tell me about your volunteering as you moved into retirement”), then guided by a series of

prompts allowing for the exploration of specific issues as they came up. Interviews were audio recorded and research notes were taken during the interviews to supplement the audio recordings (Charmaz, 2006). In addition to these research notes, personal analytic memos about particular interviews, trends between interviews, and researchers' preliminary thoughts were also taken on an ongoing process throughout the research, which allows the researcher to progress in a systematic, recorded, and transparent manner (Berbary & Boles, 2014; Charmaz, 2006). The data were collected over three months, whereby constant comparative processes and iterations between data collection and analysis took place. The study employed initial coding that was "provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 48), and focused on the research purpose and questions. Additional conceptual focused codes were then applied to further differentiate the data. Finally, axial coding, which allowed for the connection of ideas into larger categories and the development of that categorical separation into theoretical concepts, was used. The methods of constant comparison, as well as active reflexivity, were employed during data analysis. Both of these were carried out throughout the research project, reflecting the constructivist nature of the methodology (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; Denzin & Giardina, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Largely, this meant the ongoing analysis of notes taken and information gathered during interviews and surrounding interviews via the use of memos, with the intent of reaching the theoretical saturation of the concepts explored in the research questions. The findings are presented below in conjunction with a discussion based on the literature. Gender-neutral pseudonyms are used to represent participant quotations.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Participants in this study had diverse experiences through the transition to retirement, and, thus, the role that volunteering played in that transition was dynamic and often very meaningful. Participants demonstrated the complex interactions of personal needs and desires that make up how meaning is made through volunteer work. How they derived meaning from each of these elements was both explicit in their responses, and emerged more subtly through thematic analysis, resulting in four major themes: ageing and health, overcoming loss, challenging the self, and making a difference. Although no identifiable patterns based on gender differences or other demographic data emerged in the data analysis, one significant pattern did emerge across participants related to whether or not retirement was formally planned, which influenced the ways they experienced meaning and the related choices they made about volunteering. Each of these themes is interconnected, but they are discussed separately below in order to present a full analytic representation of the individual themes and sentiments of the participants in conjunction with relevant literature.

Ageing and health

Participants in this study contextualized their changing lives through retirement first by positioning themselves as ageing but not old: "I'm already 62, but, hey, I'm not one of these older adults." The majority of participants in this study articulated different ways that volunteering increased their quality of life and well-being, and resulted in feeling less "old"; potentially side-stepping, at least for a time, the physical and cognitive drawbacks of ageing. Anchored by the feeling of being able to engage in activities to keep busy, and stalling the declines of ageing, participants explored how their volunteer work reflected this time in their lives. Participant LM provided one example sharing that:

Like, the old 50 might be like 65 or 70 now, and that's why you have to keep yourself active. I think that's why other people are volunteering and thinking of it when they start transitioning out of work. You've got to have the next step, "What's the next step in my life?" Because you can have 40 years—well, you could, 30 years left yet? What the hell are you going to do?

Other retirees had different ways of understanding chronological age versus perceived age and the meanings associated with traditional descriptors connected to ageing. For example, "I don't consider myself old. Definition of old is somebody

80 or older. The definition changes and your roles, they change as you age. I'm 68 now" (DA). Another participant described ageing as a subjective process whereby perceptions of ageing are contingent on boundaries set by feeling and planning.

I will go around saying to people I'm a senior now but sometimes I catch myself. I don't think of myself as a senior whereas there are some people that just even after they retire, they are old. And I think that old has something to do with feeling that they have done their work and now they don't have to do anything more. I'm not a person like that. (HG)

Both of these participants, while reflecting on their age, did so as a way of juxtaposing their retirement status with the fact that they were still actively engaged in volunteerism: activity that precluded them from considering themselves truly old. While these reflections might stem from the forced reconsideration of personal and social roles that occur at retirement, in the context of the interviews for this study, volunteering and the associated mental and physical activity was one of the pivot points that kept participants from feeling truly "old."

Volunteering was also an effective way to contextualize good health in the present when thinking about health issues from the past, or what might lurk in the future. One older adult noted:

I had sort of an unusual step to retirement. I had some mental health issues, so I was on long term disability ... I was eligible to retire in February of 2015, so I stayed [in] medical leave for that period of time and I made the decision to do that ... I got involved in [the church] and I found my way to [community services] through church. They're a very big supporter of traumas and one of the fellow retirees who goes to bible study is a good supporter, so then I approached [community services] and became a volunteer there and so for the first few months of my retirement, I was working mostly on my mental health, so I got back involved. (JB)

Similarly, several other participants noted that volunteering allowed them to feel as though they were decelerating the inevitable movement toward the end of their lives, and made it sense for them because

you feel good about yourself ... that's what keeps you healthy so you can give more to others. You have to take care of yourself too, so that's good ... And I started to go to the gym regularly, religiously and I thought I'm going to go into my old age healthy so that I can keep doing what I'm doing or even do more if I can but see now, I work with that one association already, the cultural one, I'm at the school and now I'm thinking about the—well, I will contact Alzheimer's and see what I can do there. (LM)

The potential for internalized negatives associated with ageing are reflected in the literature on older adults' expectations around social roles (Minichiello, Browne, & Kendig, 2000), as well as the volunteering literature (Warburton, Paynter, & Petriwskyj, 2007; Warburton, Terry, Rosenman, & Shapiro, 2001). Although many older adults in this study acknowledged the eventual decline in function that may come with ageing, they were eager to minimize those declines, and were using their volunteer involvement as one way to do so: "it's great to have a reason—you know, you'd get up, reason to put your makeup on, get dressed and it's good" (LM). For most participants, the ageing process was closely linked to physical activity and participation, and how these elements contribute to or maintain youthfulness, vitality, and cognitive presence as they transition through the life course. These findings echo Nimrod and Shrira (2016), demonstrating how highly involved/active individuals had a better self-rated quality of life and reported better perceived well-being. As such, volunteering served to give a counter-meaning to the tacit negative understandings about growing older and the implications of that transition for decreased quality of life and health (Nimrod & Janke, 2012). For these participants, being engaged

with volunteer work allowed them to find new ways of making sense of growing older, allowing them to transition and age with fewer socio-emotional and physical consequences.

Adapting to change

Older adults discussed volunteering as a means of overcoming and making sense of the changes associated with retirement, particularly in their social connections, as well as the loss of purpose, identity, and meaningful time use associated with the exit from paid career work. Older adult volunteers were acutely aware of how the transition to retirement could result in changes and/or the loss of connections and identity, and saw both the good and bad of staying involved with voluntary organizations to shift their perception of those changes.

I do have a lot of clients who think “What am I going to do in retirement?” and they immediately think, “Well, I’ll volunteer and I’ll work at the hospital.” And I say, “Would you like that?” and they say, “Probably not.” And I’d say, “It’s a stereotype.” Retirees are shown to be people who volunteer at a hospital and not everybody likes that. In fact, there are a lot of people like that. So it is a thing that they need to fill the space. They need that continuity you’re talking about and they’re a little bit panicky about, “How will I do that and what has meaning for me?” So I think that volunteer activities can ramp up in retirement and hopefully they do have meaning and people pick—like I could see if my sister ends up being in a nursing home and they need somebody to help raise money to buy a blanket warmer, I might get involved in that because it has meaning and that my sister might use this blanket that’s warm. And so there’s probably lots of opportunities in retirement for it to ramp up because it has meaning and that helps the continuity filling hours and getting a routine and all those other markers of well-being and relationships. (VM)

For some, the transition was smooth, or at least lacked significant challenges. For VM’s clients and others, having meaningful activities to occupy their time was an important factor in easing the transition and maintaining a sense of self. LM said: “I volunteer in the summer for a summer camp, sometimes when I am on vacation, and I would just assist with little art projects or things like that or in the kitchen, and kids are just full of life, and I think I just wanted to keep busy [when I started].” LM’s reasons for getting involved with the summer camp show an acute awareness of the perils of leaving the working world for retirement, and a desire to reduce the personal shock and adjustment associated with this significant change. She further explained her understanding of these issues:

We get close to retirement and when you work for 35 years, over half of your life you’ve been working and then all of a sudden it’s like, “This is the end of my [pause] what’s my identity now?” That’s a huge, huge thing and you don’t have a schedule. ... It’s very frightening. It really is and I think a lot of people [would] get depressed if they don’t get involved in something. (LM)

Other participants echoed similar sentiments to the challenges that VM discusses, and the propensity for depression LM articulated. In many cases, older adults recognized the change of personal identification markers associated with being in the working world and the potential for a sense of placelessness and hopelessness resulting from changes in/loss of identity—a phenomenon identified by Nimrod and colleagues (Nimrod & Janke, 2012; Nimrod & Shrira, 2016). Participants in this study saw volunteering as a means to counteract these potential issues in their own lives, in order to better cope with their own struggles in transition.

Volunteering also offered a meaningful opportunity to develop new social and role identities. For most participants, volunteering offered new challenges and new peer groups (e.g., participation on a new community board or organizing a

new social/recreational group). Through these new ventures, older adults found opportunities for continued growth, outlets for redirecting their interests and expertise, new social connections, and increased personal vitality.

In contrast, other participants chose to engage in volunteer work that was similar to the work they did prior to retirement. When discussing why they chose their specific volunteer roles, one participant shared that “I had never really thought about why I wanted to work at the desk, but it is like what I was doing before. I guess I missed the people” (HA). For HA it went beyond a simple social connection to the way in which it was possible to interact with people through the volunteer role, and how this mirrored HA’s previous work in front-line sales and service. Prior experience in the service industry drew her to a volunteer role where she could regularly connect with new people.

By replacing lost role identity with volunteer roles, either through new roles or reprises of known work roles, older adults experienced meaningful ways of making sense of the significant shifts happening in their lives at retirement. At a primary level, volunteer roles were linked to ensuring that older adults had purpose in their lives. In this way, volunteering was a desirable choice to fill an individual’s need for purpose as it allows for freedom in choosing activity and the potential for a great deal of responsibility and personal gratification (Morrow-Howell et al., 2003). On a secondary level, engagement with volunteer work as a retiree possibly fills a specific role identity void created by leaving the workforce, a void that also represents the value of self within the community (Chambré, 1984; Greenfield & Marks, 2004). In addition and similar to previous work on older adult volunteers (see Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Kahana et al., 2013; among others), volunteering offered a meaningful way to maintain consistent social interaction with others and overcome the loss of role, and the loss of social connections that may have been a significant component of their working lives. Bram Lancee and Jonas Radl (2012) also note that people’s social and personal networks are most frequently tied to what they spend most of their lives doing; for many retirees that is their paid work space. As such, opportunities for rebuilding new or existing social connections is a priority for many retirees contemplating volunteering (Einolf, 2009; Morrow-Howell, Hong, & Tang, 2009).

Challenging self

Volunteering also provided participants with opportunities to challenge themselves in new ways and in new roles/contexts that served to extend their cognitive abilities by embracing unfamiliarity.

Strangely enough, my retirement actually changed my volunteering. I was a scout leader for 20 years and when I started thinking about retiring, I began to realize that I don’t want to tie to down to something that I need to attend every week on a regimented pattern. And so I semi-retired from that. I still help out the major camps and that kind of stuff. But I started ... well I joined the hiking trail club here. (JP)

Several other participants also noted how their involvement in volunteer work as retirees engaged them in some of the problem-solving and personal challenges that help give meaning to their lives, and provide sometimes much-needed stimulation through taking part in a new activity that was not necessarily familiar.

For me it was a desire to kind of move away from some of that [work] stuff and into the development of some different skills ... I was quite deliberate about making choices for volunteer work that would move me into areas that were new and would involve a new kind of learning. (DK)

For these participants, the idea of personal challenge was essential to maintaining their cognitive capabilities, as well as a productive place in society: elements that are essential to their self-concept and worldview. For them, contribution and maintaining an intellectual standard seemed exceptionally important, and for this reason, there was a particular way that they made sense of the experience and they made decisions accordingly.

Volunteering, then, fuelled older adults' desire to continue to grow through challenging themselves and maintaining their own mental capacity in the process (Komp et al., 2012). The benefit of this challenge and success allowed them to continue to meet the benchmarks for measuring their own worthiness, given the significant personal changes in retirement (Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Morrow-Howell et al., 2003). This desire for challenge that some participants exhibited, and the subsequent benefits they described, adds a layer of complexity to the volunteer engagement decision-making of older adults at retirement, which extends beyond the regularly explored resource-based motivational constructs (Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Buffel, Jacquet, & Verté, 2015; Principi et al., 2016). These personal and intellectual challenges must also create an opportunity for older adults to better make sense of their changed social positions, allowing for improved coping with the rigours of transition and the rearticulation of a personal sense of purpose (Lancee & Radl, 2012).

Making a difference

Participants experienced meaning in their volunteer engagement by perceiving they were making a difference on two levels: an individual level—by directly affecting the lives of others or enhancing their own self-concept—and a community level—where their focus and purpose was to influence and improve the community they lived in. The benefits derived from making a difference were a key aspect of the way that participants made sense of their volunteer experiences. For example, one participant said that “you just need to have affirmation that you are, or confirmation that you are of value to someone, and you're making a difference because otherwise, what's the point?” (ML). Similarly, BJ contextualized the personal benefit derived from making a difference by explaining:

There's a real mixture of people who come to us for help ... it just is fulfilling. ... It's such a positive experience and whether everyone must feel like that when they volunteer. I don't know whether everyone gets the same sort of gratification from volunteer work, but it really is profound for me. (BJ)

BJ discussed how she derives very deep meaning from being able to help community members, and is simultaneously drawing significant personal benefit from the work. Others talked about the benefit of their volunteering for the betterment of a community as a whole.

Well I just want to give back to the community, also the community where I live, and it's a school where—my children all went to this school, and they grew up with that school. So I've had a bit of affinity to it I guess. (LM)

I have been on the board of directors for [this organization] really since I retired. I do that because I want [the organization] to thrive and build community. And because I have always started as a teacher, I've always been a facilitator of group dynamics. (LR)

For these participants, community links and community building are central to the benefits of volunteering. These volunteers embody the notion that deep community ties tend to drive older adults to continue to contribute at the community level (Einolf, 2009; Gonzales, Matz-Costa, & Morrow-Howell, 2015). As such, volunteering offers an opportunity for older adults to experience meaning by serving their own communities, giving back, and feeling part of an activity that benefits the lives of others (Misener et al., 2010). The involvement of older adults working to better the community creates a dualistic benefit scenario where the individual benefits from the community setting, and the community benefits from the individual, mirroring Morris Okun and Josef Michel's (2006) findings, which correlate a sense of community and volunteer participation. Older volunteers' need and desire to feel as though they are making a difference is further evidence that place and organizational/community climate are essential to older adult volunteer participation (Dury et al., 2015; Ramsey, Parisi, Rebok, Gross, Tanner, Carlson, Seeman, Roth, & Spria, 2016).

Retirement choice

There was a notable pattern within the data relating to the meaning of volunteering based on whether participants formally planned their retirement in advance or whether they were “forced” into retirement through particular circumstances, such as health reasons, downsizing/restructuring, or family-care commitments. In particular, those who planned their particular exit from paid work into retirement expressed that volunteering was a way to do something different from their previous work:

I'm learning how to live differently, how to make those different choices, kind of explore a different way of being too. So yeah, it is different. And probably more at this point, we're just open to opportunities that might arise. ... So part of thinking about volunteering was that you—it just opens up some different things that you can do. (DK)

The “planned” retirees expressed these feelings openly, and it was an important way they leveraged their volunteer work to make meaning in their lives through new experiences and the development of new skills. In contrast, those who did not formally plan their retirement and felt that circumstances demanded that they retire from paid work tended to find meaning in volunteer roles that looked very similar to what they had done in work prior to retirement (e.g., a participant who had been front-of-house in a family business now works the front desk at a community hub—both roles as the first-contact person and customer support). While they expressed the same attenuations as the planned retirees related to challenging themselves, making a difference, and adapting to change, their choice of volunteer activity more closely mirrored their former occupation or previous experience. This pattern was consistent across the study sample, and provides an interesting additional layer to the way that meaning-making can be considered in the volunteering decisions of these older adults in transition.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings from the current study illustrate key ways that older adults find meaning in volunteering as they transition to retirement. By highlighting their voices, the study provides important insight into the unique ways that older adults experience sense-making and benefit-finding through volunteering. These individuals use volunteering as a leveraging tool against the inevitable pressures of ageing and health, as well as a way to benchmark their own health through participation energy and commitment. This helps them make sense of the physical and cognitive changes of ageing, and allows them to contextualize volunteer participation as a way to remake what retirement means in their lives. Older adults also find benefits in volunteering as a way to replace the personal role identity lost when leaving career work. For these older adults, volunteering also helps to replace lost social connections, which further punctuates the meaning of these leisure activities in their minds. Volunteering offers an important context for welcoming new challenges in their lives, allowing them to learn and practice new skills, engage differently with their existing skills, and build meaningful commitments in new, much less rigid schedules. Older adults were also able to make sense of the time and energy they devoted to volunteering by making a difference in their communities and in the lives of other individuals. Through the work of benefit-finding and sense-making provided by volunteering in the transition to retirement, the participants in this study were better able to answer, at least in part, questions such as: Who am I? What is my place in the world? Why do I matter?

As older adults transition out of work and into retirement, they are faced with a number of challenging circumstances, the most significant among them being the transition itself. Although we encounter media representations of the happy and healthy retired person moving into a phase of “freedom” or “the good life,” the reality of that transition is much more complex. Retirees are faced with major changes in their lives, and each individual addresses these changes in his or her own way. This study provides clear evidence that volunteering is an established and meaningful coping mechanism for some older adults as they move through this transition. Through recognizing the complexities of this important stage of

life, and giving voice to the stories of those experiencing the transition, the study offers an important contribution to knowledge for nonprofit organizations that seek to engage older adults in meaningful volunteer roles.

Based on these findings, it is clear that older adult volunteers require a different approach to volunteer recruitment and retention than other volunteers. Where youth volunteers may not be able to commit to a regular role, and adult volunteers may require a rigid schedule to help them plan and manage their volunteer commitments, older adult volunteers are generally not looking to be locked into their roles and schedules over long periods of time (Vézina & Crompton, 2012). Older adults have demonstrated positive physical and psychological well-being outcomes from volunteering, and are conscious of these benefits in real time. Organizations could more efficiently publicize these benefits to help recruit and retain older adult volunteers. Organizations must be mindful that through retirement, these older adults are also adapting to extreme changes in lifestyle and self-concept, and volunteering helps to establish, or re-establish, a healthy concept of self and community. By developing and marketing the healthy and inviting social and community aspects of volunteering, organizations could help encourage new volunteers to participate as they transition to retirement. In the face of resource constraints and the desire to remain relevant in their communities, nonprofit organizations can embrace and accommodate older adults as a pivotal source of experience and mutual benefit.

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