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(Marion County, Kansas)**

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# **Older Volunteer Leaders in a Rural Community (Marion County, Kansas)**

by Nancy H. Reynolds\*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study is concerned with the processes by which older individuals come to volunteer their services in a rural community. An older volunteer is defined as a man or a woman who does unpaid work on behalf of his or her peers in small voluntary groups such as county councils on aging, senior centers, service organizations, and social clubs for the elderly. This distinguishes them from older persons who do unpaid work on behalf of their peers in such organizations as the Gray Panthers or the American Association of Retired People.

The basic sociological concept utilized in this study of older volunteers is that of the "social role" as developed by Florian Znaniecki (1954, 1965) and used by Lopata (1971) in her study of women who perform the social role of housewife. Znaniecki defined a social role as a set of mutually interdependent social relations between a "social person" and members of his or her "social circle." It is on the basis of social roles that the total society is able to function. According to Lopata:

The economic, political, recreational, religious, educational, and family spheres of American life are carried out through roles such as farmer, miner, advertising man, manufacturer, assembly-line worker; President, senator, precinct captain, voter; baseball player, moviegoer, fan, golfer, hippie; rabbi, nun, church councilman, parishioner; teacher, student, dean, fraternity member; wife, husband, mother, grandmother, son. These and many other roles exist in society, each comprising the persons who bear the title and relate to others who grant rights and receive duties (1971, p. 5).

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Social roles change over time, "each adjusting in varying degrees to the personalities of the participants or to the circumstances under which their component relations are developed. If they change greatly, they may be redefined as a new type of role" (Lopata, 1971, p. 4).

Ernest Burgess, a pioneer in the sociology of aging, argued that "the retired man and his wife are imprisoned in a roleless role. They have no vital function to perform" (1960, p. 20). This statement gave rise to the concept of role loss and role substitution and ultimately to the formulation of activity theory. From the activity perspective, the decreased or restricted social world of the elderly results from society's withdrawal from the aging person. From this point of view, the older person who ages successfully is one who resists the shrinkage of his or her social world. He or she does this by maintaining the activities of middle age as long as possible and by finding substitutions for role losses of work and family.

Social work practitioners and social scientists were strongly influenced by Burgess' arguments and his ideas of role loss and role substitution. They saw volunteering as an emotional substitute for the losses of work and family roles (Rosenblatt, 1966). Philanthropic organizations and the federal government also responded to the idea that the volunteer role was an optimal solution to role losses associated with old age.

One of the first projects that sought to create formal volunteer roles for the elderly was sponsored by the Ford Foundation. In 1960, the Foundation selected seven geographical areas in the United States to receive grants for the specific purpose of establishing voluntary organizations in which elderly people would be trained by a social worker "to learn to do things for themselves" [and] "to do something for the community" (Ford Foundation, 1963; Twente, 1970). A second project that created volunteer roles for the aged was the Committee on Aging, Department of Public Affairs of the Community Service Society of New York. In 1962, the Committee authorized a research study of 250 older persons who lived in the lower east side of Manhattan to assess the capacity and interest of the elderly to perform either gainful or voluntary employment. The study found the 25 percent of men and women aged 60 to 74 years old were physically able, but that they would require help and support in order to make the best use of their interests and abilities. As a result of these findings, a project known as SERVE was established to assist older volunteers (Sainer 1977).

In 1971, the White House Conference on Aging recommended the establishment of a policy to create national awareness about the worth and talents of older Americans as volunteers (Monk and Cryns, 1974). As a result of this recommendation, the older American Volunteer Programs (OAVP) of ACTION were established under the authority of the Older Americans Act. These programs included the: Foster Grandparents (FGP), Senior Companions (SCP), and Retired Senior Volunteer Programs (RSVP) (Bowles, 1977).

Interest in the older volunteer role was enhanced in the 1970s with the establishment of two types of formal organizations for the aged. One included mass membership organizations such as the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and the Gray Panthers. The other was comprised of small voluntary organizations such as county councils on aging, senior centers, service organizations, and social clubs for the elderly.

In my review of the literature I found that although there has been considerable interest in older volunteers in the past two decades, there have been no published studies that have explored the paths individuals take over the course of their lives that led them to become volunteers in community-help groups for the elderly. The purpose of this study, then, is to analyze the processes by which older individuals become involved in volunteer work and stay involved in that work in a particular community.

### THE SETTING

The older volunteers selected for study were members of a small voluntary group for elderly persons in Marion County, Kansas. In 1960 Marion County was one of seven geographical areas to receive a grant from the Ford Foundation to establish a voluntary association for the elderly. This group, incorporated under the name of Senior Citizens of Marion County, Inc., is in its twenty-eighth year of continuous service to older people. It is also the oldest self-help organization for the elderly in the state of Kansas.

### PREVIOUS STUDIES

According to much of the literature, senior citizens volunteer because it serves as a way of dealing with role loss "in old age" (Chambre, 1984). This emphasis reflects the influence of the activity perspective which suggests that older persons who age successfully resist the shrinkage of their social worlds by maintaining the activities of middle age as long as possible. Such studies ignore

the diversity within the older population, and changes in an individual's notions of his or her roles through time; some older individuals may gladly give up their work roles while others sorely miss them. In like manner, some may miss family roles whereas others willingly surrender them. The essential point is that one person's notion of loss may be another's cherished release.

Although activity perspective has dominated the literature on older volunteers for nearly twenty years, the central question whether older individuals, who lacked ties to work and to family, tended to volunteer more frequently than those with such ties was not empirically tested until 1984. The conclusions did not support activity theory. The researcher found that rather than responding to institutionalized role loss, a significant number of elderly volunteers had been volunteers most of their lives. *Chambre*, therefore, suggested that an alternative perspective, "continuity theory" (*Atchley*, 1972), was more appropriate for understanding this area of human behavior. According to *Atchley*, continuity theory maintains:

As the individual grows older, he is predisposed toward maintaining continuity in his habits, associations, preferences, and so on. Unlike the activity theory, the continuity theory does not assume that lost roles need be replaced (*Atchley*, 1972, p. 36).

Continuity theory, although a better conceptual tool than activity theory, cannot fully explain the older volunteer role. It lacks a subjective dimension in which older persons explain the process of how they become volunteers in the particular social setting. For such as analysis, we must go beyond continuity theory to a social behaviorist approach to volunteering as a process.

#### A SOCIAL BEHAVIORIST APPROACH TO AGING

In this study, the emphasis is on the aged as social actors, as active participants in the creation of their social worlds. Role loss is not viewed as a universal feature of old age, but as an interpretative process made by an individual in a particular situation. The focus, therefore, is not on "the older volunteer role" in a structural sense, but on the processes by which older persons came to volunteer their services — that is, the paths they have taken in their lifetimes that led them to volunteer their services in a particular social context.

The methodological approach taken in this case study is "naturalistic behaviorism." Naturalistic behaviorism requires that the researcher actively enter the social worlds of those studied, so



as to make these worlds understandable "from the standpoint of . . . the *behaviors, languages, definitions, attitudes, and feelings* of those studied" (Denzin, 1978-78).

### RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The first area of inquiry concerned the social context in which respondents play their volunteer roles: (a) the larger community in which they live; and (b) the small voluntary group for older people in which they volunteer their services. While this area is descriptive, it is essential that the social context be understood so that linkages can be established between the individual's symbols and definitions, and the groups that provide those conceptions (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin, 1975).

The second area of inquiry concerned the characteristics of the sample. This area was also descriptive, and since the sample was not randomly selected, no hypotheses were developed.

The third area of inquiry was concerned with the process by which people become volunteers—the paths individuals have taken over their lifetimes to become volunteers in a rural community. Three hypotheses were developed:

1. Older individuals who volunteer their services in small voluntary groups for older people are continuing a definition of self.

Chambre (1984) suggested that older volunteers are predisposed toward maintaining continuity in their habits, associations and preferences.

2. Older individuals who volunteer their services in small voluntary groups for older people are recreating the values of their social world.

Hypothesis 2 links the individual's definition of self with the values of his or her social world. As social actors, individuals not only make definitions on the basis of the values of their social worlds but, in the process, recreate these values.

3. Older individuals who volunteer their services in small voluntary groups for older people define the situation as a response to perceived community needs rather than to personal losses.

Hypothesis 3 is a test of activity theory—the assumption that the loss of work or family roles gives impetus to volunteering among the elderly (Carp, 1968; Payne, 1977; Sainer, 1977; Chambre, 1984). My study assumes that older volunteers define and respond to perceived community needs rather than to role loss.

### DATA COLLECTION

Data collection included: participant observation, analysis of historical records, and in-depth interviews. Denzin (1978) termed multiple methods of data collection "triangulation," a process which requires the researcher "to go to as many concrete situations as possible in forming the observational base." According to Denzin (1978: 101-102), this "forces the researcher to *situationally* check the validity and reliability of the specimens and emerging causal proposition."

Data collection occurred in two phases. During the first phase which began in November, 1982 and ended in August, 1984, I became a field representative of the North Central-Flint Hills Area Agency on Aging to the Senior Citizens of Marion County, Inc. In this role, I became an ex-officio member of the Senior Citizens of Marion County, Inc. and its four nutritional site councils. I traveled to Marion County three days a month for meetings and participated in the four nutritional programs within the county.

During phase one, I listened to what was said and participated in such events as the Old Settler's Day Celebration, a wedding, a funeral, a fiftieth wedding anniversary party, ice cream socials, a mock wedding that celebrated the upcoming marriage of an older couple, and monthly luncheons at various senior centers.

Hundreds of conversations took place during phase one. These conversations, termed "friendly conversations," have been defined as resembling casual conversations but with an important addition: the investigator, as a skilled researcher, introduces research questions into each conversation. Over a period of time, I gathered a considerable amount of data and in the process learned the regional language and established feelings of rapport (Spradley, 1978).

During phase two, which began in September, 1984 and continued through August, 1985, I continued to attend monthly meetings of the Senior Citizens of Marion County, Inc., and to have "friendly conversations" with its members. Also during this phase, I conducted unstructured interviews with twenty older volunteers. These interviews, which lasted from approximately ninety minutes to more than two hours each, were concerned with the individual's work and volunteer history, his or her definitions of self, and the volunteer roles that each played.

The approach taken in interviews was that of a "topical life history." The topical life history approach examines the experiences and definitions held by a person on selected topics.

Materials for analysis also included records and documents that helped shed light on the subjective behavior of respondents (cf. Denzin, 1978, Chapter 8). In my study, these materials included the historical records of Marion County and those of the Senior Citizens of Marion County, Inc.

In unstructured interviews, I was free to treat topics as they arose, pursue interesting leads, and allow my imagination or ingenuity full reign (Becker and Geer, 1957). As Spradley (1978) noted, the exclusive use of research elements or the introduction of them too quickly tends to transform interviews into interrogations. A skilled interviewer attempts to avoid these problems by maintaining a friendly manner and interspersing a few minutes of easygoing talk here and there throughout the interview.

The purpose of the study was stated at the beginning of the interview. I also used a prepared questionnaire, although the actual interview did not always proceed in any particular order and, at times, new lines of questioning were adopted.

### SAMPLING

The first task was to identify the types of volunteer roles that existed within the organization. I identified three types: (1) Leadership, (2) Instrumental, and (3) Expressive-roles. The Leadership role is one in which a person gives his or her time in the planning, organization, maintenance, and advocacy of the organization. Leaders included elected or appointed leaders, the silver-haired legislator, and charismatic leaders (those who lead by virtue of personality and ability rather than by the virtue of office). Instrumental volunteers were the "doers" or the action group, and they included bus drivers, tour guides, home-delivered meal drivers, cooks, kitchen helpers, hosts, hostesses, consumer service advocates, tax preparation assistants, craft makers, quilters, and outreach workers. Expressive volunteers were those who called, visited, and corresponded with the sick and housebound elderly.

The technique that I used to select volunteers for interviews was the reputational approach, a method in which community members are asked to classify others. The key informants chosen were the 12 members of the Board of Directors of the Senior Citizens of Marion County, Inc., and the Director of the Department for Elderly in Marion County, an ex-officio member of the board. These 13 individuals were asked to identify five volunteers in each of the three categories (a total of fifteen volunteers to be named by each key informant). Specifically, they were asked to

identify persons who had volunteered their services in the group for at least three-to-five years, to include both males and females in each of the categories, and to select persons who were both articulate and willing to spend the time necessary for this type of survey. Final selection of respondents for interviews was based on individuals named most frequently.

During planning stages, it became clear that there was one serious limitation to the study—only one group had been isolated for study. Moreover, as the study progressed, it was found that the use of the reputational approach in sample selection had additional limitations. The sample of "volunteers most frequently named" was comprised almost entirely of leaders (nineteen out of twenty), hence the title, "Older Volunteer Leaders in a Rural Community." Fifteen of these leaders also served in instrumental-type volunteer roles and nine in expressive-type volunteer roles.

A different picture may have emerged if a random sample rather than a purposive sample of volunteers had been selected. That is, a sizeable number of the respondents might not have been leaders, but instead they may have come from instrumental or expressive-type volunteers. In that case, it may have been possible to compare and contrast types of volunteer work performed. Further research is needed to determine if the type of volunteer roles played is a decisive factor in the way older volunteers define self, social world, and situation.

Letters explaining the details of the study were sent to twenty individuals. A telephone call which established the time and place of the interview then followed. One woman refused because of illness. Another person on the list, who also was female and shared many of the characteristics of the individual who refused, was substituted. Interviews were conducted in April and May of 1985. Nineteen of the interviews were conducted in the home of the respondent, while the twentieth interview was conducted in a senior center.

#### RECORD KEEPING

In phase one, only records required by the North Central-Flint Hills Area Agency on Aging were made. These records, as well as the formal minutes of the group, were available for study. In phase two, formal research records, including a field work journal were kept.

The unstructured, in-depth interviews were tape recorded.

Tapes were made not only because they provided accurate data, but because they allowed the researcher to hear the tone of the conversation and its progress (Lofland, 1971; Spradley, 1978). I was careful to secure the interviewee's approval of taping, explaining why it was necessary and stressing that it would be confidential. Notes were also taken during the interviews for two reasons: sometimes the tape recorder did not work (this happened once during my 20 interviews), and sometimes additional information was needed before it could be transcribed (Spradley, 1978).

### FINDINGS

There were three areas of inquiry. The first was concerned with *The Setting* in which the older individuals played their volunteer roles: the larger community in which they lived and the small voluntary groups for older people in which they volunteered their services. The second area of inquiry was concerned with the demographic characteristics of the sample. These findings are presented under the heading, *Characteristics of the Sample*. The third area of inquiry was concerned with volunteering as a process. Findings in this area are presented under the heading, *Paths to Volunteering*.

#### *The Setting*

Marion County was created in 1855 by the territorial legislature of Kansas. More than one-third of its land was granted to the Santa Fe Railroad, an ingenious colonizer, which lured Mennonites from the Southern Ukraine and members of sixteen other nationalities to the county. Those who came were thrifty, hardworking farmers. Although they differed in religious beliefs, they shared a deep commitment to the Bible and to the teachings of Jesus Christ (Van Meter, 1972).

The early settlers were quick to establish elementary schools which not only served to educate the young, but which became meeting places for various religious groups, and social centers for political rallies, literary societies, spelling bees, musical programs, and 4-H and Rural Life assemblies as well. In all, 130 school districts were organized and most functioned until 1945 when the Kansas Legislature voted to consolidate rural school districts. Although consolidation offered some advantages to students, many local citizens still believe that it diminished community cohesiveness and spirit. As one woman said, "When you're as small as we are, your school is your town" (Van Meter, 1972).

Consolidation led to the closing of schools, and in many cases, school buildings were torn down and removed. As a result, there was no neutral meeting place where different religious and ethnic groups might gather to discuss their common concerns. In Marion County where the population was ethnically and religiously diverse, the result was devastating. Soon after schools were closed, many Christian congregations chose not to meet with other religious groups because they did not wish to enter *their* churches. There were even divisions within denominations. For example, Catholic groups from Ireland, France, Mexico, and Poland did not always get along. There were similar divisions among German, Dutch, and Russian Mennonites and conservative and ultra-conservative Mennonite groups. Without common meeting places where they could affirm their shared values, the various groups withdrew from active community participation. Civic activities declined and some small towns became "ghost like" (Ford Foundation, 1963; Van Meter, 1972; Walter, 1985).

Since school consolidation in the 1940's, Marion County's economy has remained largely agricultural. However, other industries, including mills for processing grain and livestock feed, railroads, stone quarries, food processing, manufacturing, and oil exploration businesses have been added to the economic picture (Van Meter, 1972).

The population of Marion County reached a peak of 22,923 persons in 1920, but after 1930 it began a steady decline; the 1980 census which listed 13,522 persons represented a net loss of 9401 persons over the previous 50 years (Van Meter, 1972; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1980). Population loss has been due to two major factors: the shift from an agricultural society to an industrialized nation, and the loss of young and middle-aged workers. Marion County seems to have aged at a faster rate than the country as a whole. By 1960, the county's 65 and older population represented 14.9 percent of the general population; in 1970, it represented 19 percent, and in 1980, it had grown to 22.5 percent (Van Meter, 1972; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Part 18, 1980).

#### *Senior Citizens of Marion County, Inc.*

The Senior Citizens of Marion County, Inc. began in September of 1959 when the state of Kansas was asked if it would be interested in receiving a grant from the Ford Foundation. The Ford Foundation, in connection with its work on aging, was in the process of

making demonstration grants for the purpose of finding new social roles for the elderly. Kansas was interested and, after some deliberation, Marion County was chosen to apply for the grant. The grant provided funding for the services of a trained social worker for a three-year period to establish a voluntary group for the elderly. The voluntary group created in Marion County was called "Golden Years, Inc." Six community-based groups for older people also were established during that period. A Ford Foundation worker wrote that after years of rivalry and duplication of efforts among the various religious and ethnic groups, leaders of these groups were finally "beginning to work together" (Ford Foundation, 1963, p. 3).

In 1965, Congress passed the Older Americans Act, an act that spelled out specific government responsibilities and objectives for the elderly. It also created an aging network to achieve these objectives. Federal and state level aging networks were established in 1965; however, it was not until 1973 that an amendment to the original act created area agencies on aging, thereby extending the network to county and local levels.

At the same time, many counties, including Marion County, passed legislation authorizing a mill levy to support programs for older residents. Marion County, with the assistance of the North Central-Flint Hills Area Agency on Aging, created the Marion County Council on Aging to administer both federal and county funds. In 1978 after four years of operation, the Council merged with Golden Years, Inc. to become the Senior Citizens of Marion County, Inc. (Interview with Noreen Weems, Director, Marion County Department for Elderly, July 3, 1985).

Today, the Senior Citizens of Marion County, Inc. is the nucleus of the aging network in the county, the officially-recognized organization for the distribution of both federal and county funds. It is a voluntary organization run by and for older individuals. It has eleven senior organizations located in Burns, Durham, Florence, Goessel, Hillsboro, Lehigh, Lincolnville, Marion, Peabody, Ramona, and Tampa. Each of the senior organizations pays its own operational expenses through such activities as quilting, the sale of crafts, ice cream socials, and soup suppers. Federal funds provide nutrition sites at four of these organizations, and county mill levy funding and federal grants provide for capital improvements.

The eleven senior centers provide focal points not only for the older population but for other age groups as well. The buildings

serve as neutral territories (in much the same way school buildings once did), where people of all ages can meet to solve common concerns. The young, the middle aged, and the elderly of all ethnic and religious groups gather for soup suppers, ice cream socials, bake sales, and other fund raisers sponsored by senior citizens. The buildings also serve as meeting places for such organizations as the Kiwanis, Lions, and Rotary Clubs. They are also rented out for special events such as family and school reunions, receptions and anniversary dinners.

#### *Characteristics of the Sample*

All individuals in the sample were white as were all members of Senior Citizens of Marion County, Inc. According to residents, at the time of the study there was only one black family in the entire county. This was well below the percentage of blacks among the older population in Kansas—5.3 percent. However, older blacks in Kansas are overwhelmingly urban (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1980).

The sample was comprised of ten males and ten females. The age range spanned 27 years, with the youngest respondent 65 years old, the oldest 92, and the median age—75.5 years. Twelve persons in the sample were married, seven were widowed, and one was divorced. The married persons included nine males and three females; those widowed included six females and one male. The divorced respondent was female. Twelve persons in the sample lived with a spouse while six lived alone. One had a grandson living with her temporarily while he attended college, one lived in retirement housing, and nineteen others lived in the community.

Seventy-five percent of my respondents had annual incomes of \$10,000 or more. This compared favorably with a national sample of older Americans in which only 52.5 percent of the population had yearly incomes this high. Eight persons in my sample (40 percent) had incomes that ranged from \$20,000 to \$49,999 as compared to only 34.3 percent in the national sample (American Association of Retired Persons, 1984).

The median level of education for my sample was 12 years, and seventy-five percent of my respondents had completed high school. This compared favorably to a national sample of older Americans, in which 46 percent of those surveyed were high school graduates (American Association of Retired Persons, 1984). It was also higher than the 62 percent of adults 25 years and older in Marion County who had completed high school (Bureau of the Census, 1980). Eight



also had four or more years of college. The high level of education for my respondents was further evidenced by the large number that had taken graduate courses: five (25 percent) had completed some graduate work, one had a masters degree, and three others had masters degrees and had taken additional graduate work.

All reported that their health was better than average. Three said that they did not take any kind of medication, and one man said his work habits had not changed in fifty-five years. Nine stated that they had a little heart trouble or hypertension, but they said that this did not keep them from performing volunteer roles either in their home communities or at the county level. A woman of eighty-one walked with a cane and had had a series of operations on her knee; but even she was a regular participant in most senior citizen activities, and she seemed to have great personal energy, as did all persons in the sample.

#### *Paths to Volunteering*

The majority of respondents were long-term residents of Marion County. Nine had been born in the county, and they had spent virtually all of their lives there. One man had been born in the Southern Ukraine and he had moved to Marion County when he was six years old. Five others had been born either in other parts of Kansas or as young adults they had moved to Marion County from other midwestern states. Four others had been born and reared in the county, but they had spent at least a part of their adult lives in other geographical areas; all four had returned to the county from six to twenty years before I began my study. The remaining respondent had been born in Missouri and had spent most of her life in Kansas. In 1978, after she and her husband had retired, they moved to the county because they felt comfortable with the norms and values of the community.

It may be noteworthy that fifteen of twenty respondents were descendants of German-speaking peoples. The other five included two individuals of Swedish descent, one Czech, an individual of Irish and English descent, and an individual of French and English descent.

All were lifelong members of a Christian church. Seven were Mennonites, seven Methodists, three Lutherans, two Catholics (one Irish and one Czech), and one was a Baptist. All were also lifelong church volunteers, having served their churches in a variety of ways, from teaching Sunday school, to quilting and sewing in

ladies' circles, to serving as Sunday school superintendent, and as deacons. Over the course of their lives, sixteen of the respondents had also volunteered for the PTA, Girl Scouts, young adult groups, home demonstration groups, the Red Cross, the school board, the Lions Club, and the Historical Society.

Although respondents had lived most of their lives in predominantly agricultural areas, only six reported that farming had been their major occupation. Eight had taught school, and the other occupations, which included one member each, were: nurses' aide, social worker, bank teller, professional musician, and a grain and supply elevator operator. Two others had been ordained ministers (although their major occupations were educator and carpenter, respectively). The majority, therefore, had held service-type (or people-oriented) jobs. The tendency toward service-type occupations was further underscored by the fact that three of the farmers had also held part-time service-type positions—one had been a part-time insurance agent for over twenty years, one had been a crop appraiser, and the third had served as county commissioner. During interviews, a dairy farmer even suggested that delivering milk in rural communities should be considered a service job — not only because the milk is delivered but because, as he put it, the milkman performs many other services including putting the milk away, delivering a person's paper, and anything else "that needs to be done at the moment."

#### *How They Became Members*

Cases Eight and Sixteen were the founding members of the Senior Citizens of Marion County, Inc. It was they who canvassed the county, and promoted the idea of an active county-wide senior citizens organization. They also inspired others to establish or reactivate community senior centers. Cases Eight and Sixteen became members of the group in the early 1960s in their home community of Hillsboro, which was the site of the first senior center in Marion County and in the state of Kansas. Their entry into the group came at a time of transition; in 1963 the Ford Foundation-sponsored social worker had completed her work and the foundation expected local people to assume full charge of all organizations.

Case Eight was well known in the community. He had moved to Marion County at age six when his family had emigrated from the Southern Ukraine. When Case Eight was in seventh grade, he had a vision in which he was told to dedicate his life to teaching young people. He did just that—teaching forty years, first in a one-

room schoolhouse, and at the end of his teaching career, as President of Tabor College in Hillsboro. When he became president of Tabor college, he was also ordained a minister. After nine years at Tabor college, he then served sixteen years as Executive Secretary and Treasurer of the Mennonite Brethren Foreign Missions Program, a position which took him to five continents and thirty six countries. When he became a member of the Hillsboro group he was married (his wife died in 1979), he taught Bible classes at Tabor College, and he was the author of several books. In 1985 at the age ninety two, he was writing his twentieth book, a task he expected to be completed in "about two years." Throughout his life he had been an active volunteer both in his church and in the community. As he told me, "I have been involved in helping people all of my life. However, I do not want to take credit for it, as credit belongs to the Lord. He uses me."

Case Sixteen was also an educator. He had been born in Nebraska, and he had moved to Marion County in 1950. During the last few decades he had lived in Marion County, although he continues to own a farm in Nebraska. He told me that teaching was his "first love," but it was his farm (which his nephew runs) that made him financially independent. He, like Case Eight, was a Mennonite who had been a lifelong volunteer, both in his church and in his profession. He was married and was a retired Superintendent of Schools. He defined himself as a "natural helper," one who had been taught to be that way by his family.

Cases Eight and Sixteen became members of the Hillsboro Senior Center because they believed that senior centers were something more than meeting places for the elderly. As educators, they were acutely aware that school reorganization and school consolidation had had many negative costs to rural America. They both felt strongly that small towns needed a central meeting place, a place that might help bind the community together. They saw senior centers as places where people of all ages might come together for community activities.

#### *Cases Six, Eleven and Twenty*

A third man, Case Six, was a former county commissioner and a resident of the city of Marion. He defined himself "as an individual called upon to assist in organizing help in time of crises." The other two, Cases Eleven and Twenty, were women. Case Eleven, the widow of an oil executive, had been a lifetime volunteer in her church. She had also served during times of crises

in the county—as a Red Cross volunteer during World War II and during the 1951 floods in Florence. She told me that she had volunteered during these times because "It seemed the thing to do. I was there when they needed me, when they asked me." In 1970, she believed that her community needed her again. The second woman, Case Twenty, a resident of the city of Marion, was a former professional musician and the widow of a prominent trial lawyer. During her working life she had been a volunteer in her church and in the community. According to her, "I was always willing to oblige in whatever was being asked of me."

*Cases Two, Three, Five, Seven, Nine, Ten, Thirteen, and Eighteen*

Around 1977, Cases Eight and Sixteen, the former college president and the former school superintendent, asked six other individuals to found senior organizations in their home communities. They did so, using the argument that senior centers not only had the potential of binding small towns together but of uniting the entire county as well. As a result of their work, five new senior centers were established in the towns of Durham, Florence, Lehigh, Lincolntown, and Tampa. In Durham, they contacted Cases Two and Five. Case Two had been an associate of Case Sixteen, and she had taught for thirty five years in Durham. As a teacher, she had done much volunteer work with young people. She was also a volunteer in her church and was well known locally as someone who was always willing to help others. Case Five was a fifty eight year old man, a farmer and housepainter, who not only had been a lifelong volunteer in his church, but who had served eighteen years on the school board. He had also been a leader in the Lions Club. He defined himself "as a natural helper, a person who was brought up to help others." He also told me that he was "particularly interested in the welfare of senior citizens."

In Florence, Cases Eight and Sixteen contacted Case Ten, a dairy farmer who had been an active church worker. In interviews, Case Ten told me that he saw the establishment of senior centers as useful because "the churches had failed to do the things that the Bible tells them to do." In Lehigh, Cases Eight and Sixteen also successfully recruited Case Three, a farmer and part-time insurance agent, who was known locally as a loyal church volunteer and a leader who responded to community needs.

In Lincolntown, Case Nine, a lifelong volunteer in her community and the postal clerk there for thirty five years, was contacted. She volunteered because she believed that senior organizations offered "fellowship for the old and a way of getting them out

of the house." Case Seven, a woman who had farmed her own land and who was a leader in her church and in the local Home Demonstration Club, also joined the organization. She did so because she felt that "the situation required a leader in her community."

After recruiting these six individuals, Cases Eight and Sixteen turned their attention to Goessel, which had formed a senior citizens group during the Ford Foundation demonstration period. Their purpose in Goessel was not to form a new group but to rejuvenate the old one which, according to their views, was not as active as it should be. In Goessel, they selected Cases Thirteen and Eighteen. Case Thirteen was a retired minister who had lived away from the community for several years and who had only recently returned to Goessel to serve as a minister to "older people." In interviews, he defined his ministry as one that offered the elderly practical services and as he put it, an opportunity to "play." He told me that his work was inspired by his parent's generation which "worked in the fields until they could work no longer and then sat in the house waiting to die." His mission was to make certain that this did not happen in Goessel. Case Eighteen, the other volunteer recruited, was well-known throughout the county as a crop appraiser for the Agricultural Commission, an occupation he had performed for twenty years. He was also a lifelong church volunteer and he and his wife were known as people who responded when others needed help. He told me that he had become a member because he was "interested in the community and what the group was doing for it."

#### *Cases One, Twelve, Four, and Twenty-One*

Cases One and Twelve entered the group through other channels. When they joined the senior organizations (in Peabody and Hillsboro, respectively), both had recently retired from their jobs. Case One was the widow of an engineer who had died unexpectedly at an early age. Several years after her husband's death and about the time her youngest child was finishing high school, she had been asked by a county commissioner if she would assist the county by becoming a social worker. Although she had not worked previously and was financially independent, she took the job and worked as a social worker for the next 11 years. When she retired, she wanted to be a part of the group for older people because as she told me: "I had heard of the group, its purpose and achievements for many years. They had such good times and were into so many things."

Before Case Twelve decided to join, he had been a grain elevator operator in Hillsboro, the home community of Cases Eight and Sixteen. Throughout his life, he had been a church volunteer and, to his thinking, volunteer work was "both an obligation and an outlet." According to him, his attitude about helping others "goes back to my high school days when I learned that people were the most important thing in life." He told me that during his working years he had looked forward to retirement because then he could devote himself full time to volunteering. As he reported in interviews, his goal in life was to become "a part of the movement to help older people."

Case Four, a school superintendent in Florence, was nearing retirement when he heard of the "Golden Years" volunteer group. He and his wife, who was a teacher, were both lifelong volunteers in church and in social organizations, and to them it was a logical move to join the organization in Florence. Case Twenty-One, a former nurses' aide, became a member because she thought that people in the Golden Years group in her hometown (Peabody) were "such nice people." She had been a lifelong volunteer, but her volunteer work had always been church related. She told me that she wished to become a part of the group for older people because, "I believe in God and in people, and I have fun doing it."

#### *Cases Fourteen, Fifteen, and Nineteen*

The remaining three respondents (Cases Fourteen, Fifteen, and Nineteen) became members because they sought intergration or reintegration into their respective communities. Case Nineteen had been born in Marion County, and she had lived there until she was married. She then moved to Wichita, Kansas, where she lived for the next thirty-nine years. In interviews she told me that she and her husband had returned to Marion seven years before my study to be near her siblings (all of whom lived in the county). She defined herself as "one who responds when asked for help," and she said that she joined the senior center in Marion because she wanted fellowship with her peer group.

Case Fourteen was a relative newcomer to Marion County who had been born in Missouri, but who had spent most of her adult life in various Kansas cities. She had been a bank teller and her husband had been a safety inspector with a trucking firm before they retired and moved to Marion in 1979. They chose to retire in Marion because they liked the geographical area and the people.

She became a member of Marion's senior center after a friend had invited her to one of the meetings. Case Fifteen, a 79 year old divorcee, had returned to Durham in 1979 when her mother had become ill. After living there a while, she decided to remain. With a masters degree she was better educated than most of her peers, and unlike some local citizens she was keenly interested in politics. A neighbor invited her to a meeting at the senior center in Durham, and as she stated in an interview, "I found work there that needed to be done."

#### *Summary of How They Became Members*

Thirteen respondents had been asked to become members (either by the county commissioners or by leaders within the group). Four others had heard of the group and its accomplishments and they joined for the purpose of becoming involved in an important social movement. Although the remaining three members had joined for integration or reintegration into the community, they also believed that they had an obligation to serve their communities. The pride of my respondents in their senior organizations was expressed recently by Case Eight in an interview with the Editor of *Keynotes*, a bimonthly publication of the North Central-Flint Hills Area Agency on Aging. According to the interview:

The growth of senior centers and the development of programs for the elderly in Marion County over the last 25 years is a social change that thrills a fellow. . . . Senior centers have put many small towns back on the map. There was a time when communities like Florence, Lehigh and Tampa were suffering dearly from the loss of their local schools, the result of school consolidation of the 1950s, but thanks to senior centers, as the song goes, "times they are a-changin." Before consolidation, the organization that constituted a focal point in the community was the school. It was the one place where they would all come to express their opinions or to vote. But with the consolidation school movement, that disappeared. Many communities became factionalized and tensions between different religious and ethnic groups rose. Here in Hillsboro, there was one denomination that would never go to the Mennonite church and would never go to a Catholic church. It took them years to get over that. But now they come to the senior center. Everyone has an equal opportunity at the senior center. The beauty of it is that you can get people together on a neutral base. They reduce tension between communities because they shift attention to contributions and not differences. Senior centers develop a feeling of cooperation and togetherness—tolerance. . . . The older people of our communities can best be served by these local organizations. The great challenge is showing people how they can take care of their own needs. The important thing is that many people realize that (senior centers) are something they can develop in common and that everyone can contribute. . . . It's a great movement! (Walter, September/October 1985).

### *Research Hypotheses*

#### *Definition of Self*

Hypothesis 1: Older individuals who volunteer their services in small voluntary groups for older people are continuing a definition of self.

All respondents were members of a church, and they had all been lifelong church volunteers. Over the course of their lives, seventeen had also volunteered for secular groups including the PTA, the Farm Bureau, the Red Cross, The Hospital Auxillary, the Lions Club, the school board, and the County Extension Board. Thus, all seventeen had for many years defined themselves as "service-oriented." Fourteen defined themselves as natural or spontaneous helpers, three said that they were the kind of people who responded to community needs when asked to help, one saw himself as an organizer ("one called upon to organize help in time of crisis"), and another defined himself as one "used by God to help others." Only one of the respondents did not see herself as a volunteer. In fact, she told me that volunteer work was not an important part of her life. However, interviews showed that she was also a lifelong volunteer in her church and that she had taught school for forty years, a profession that typically "goes hand in hand with volunteering." By joining the Senior Citizens group, she seems to have reaffirmed her definition of self as a service-oriented person.

When respondents were asked if they had sought role continuity by joining a senior group, nineteen replied that they had not. Some were quite adamant that when they joined they were not seeking anything—after all, as they expressed it, "they had been asked to serve." However, after I had raised the issue, they could see continuity in their attempt to "reach out to help people." They were, however, not reaching out to continue any particular social role, but rather to continue a way of life—a definition of self as a "service-oriented person."

The one individual who appears to have sought role continuity by joining the senior group was Case Thirteen, the minister. The role of minister, however, was not his major role for before he was ordained at age sixty-three, he had been a carpenter. From age sixty-three to age seventy-five he had been a minister in Chicago, then following his retirement he returned to his hometown of Goessel where he began a ministry for older people. However, he was neither hired as a minister nor was he paid in the role. Rather, he held a voluntary *unpaid* position as Director of the Senior



Center. He, too, therefore, maintained a way of life and continued to define himself as a person who helped others "voluntarily" because it was his Christian duty, and as he told me, it was an obligation that all persons shared.

#### *Values of their Social World*

Hypothesis 2: Older individuals who volunteer their services in small voluntary groups for older people are recreating the values of their social world.

As noted earlier, Marion County was settled by seventeen different nationalities a little more than a century ago. Although pioneer settlers differed ethnically and religiously, they shared (as do their children and grandchildren) a deep devotion to God, duty, and community (Van Meter, 1972). A considerable number of respondents said that they saw work that needed to be done and they "did it." This is why they continued to volunteer: The work was still there, and if they did not do it, who would?

To say that older individuals have a sense of duty is not to say that they do not enjoy volunteer work in the group, for this was mentioned many times in interviews. As one seventy-seven year old man told me, "I wouldn't do it if I did not enjoy it." Moreover, volunteers sometimes benefited from services provided by the Senior group. For example, Cases Eight and Sixteen, who were responsible for the development of the group, were both regular participants at the noon meal in Hillsboro. There were other less tangible benefits as well. For example, Case Twenty, who at the time of the study was eighty-four years old, walked five long blocks to her Center "to be where the action is," to quilt, and to have her noon meal. When asked why she continued to be involved, she told me, "the group is accomplishing its purpose and I'm having a darned good time."

#### *Defining the Situation*

Hypothesis 3: Older individuals who volunteer their services in small groups for older people define the situation as a response to community needs rather than to personal losses.

Study data supported hypothesis 3 that respondents who volunteer their services responded to community needs rather than to personal losses. None of the respondents mentioned the loss of a spouse or the loss of family roles as factors in their joining the Senior group. Only one man had become a volunteer because he wanted to minister to older people; in his case, this could be interpreted as a desire to replace a work role.

A second factor served to strengthen the conclusion that older individuals did not volunteer as a substitute for social role losses (job retirement or the loss of a spouse): Twelve were married and living with a spouse; the other eight were involved with family, friends, and neighbors outside of the group. A few were still farming, one continued to work as an insurance agent, and as noted earlier, a 92 year-old man was in the process of writing his twentieth book. The majority were volunteers in other settings, as well. Moreover, most regularly visited kin and friends, and some continued to travel and vacation in various parts of the United States. In sum, they were not, as predicted by activity theory, older people who sought volunteer roles because of personal losses—in family or work roles. Rather, they defined themselves as service-oriented people who volunteered because they saw senior organizations as meeting their communities' needs.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

My findings suggest that the older volunteer role is too complex to be understood by either activity theory or continuity theory. Study results show that humans are active from birth to death, and accordingly, activity per se is a constant across all human situations. In this sense, the accounts that social actors give of their behavior—their definitions of self, situation, and social world—are embedded in ongoing activity. That is, the accounts people give of how they travel along life's highway are of process rather than structure and, thus, are always in state of flux (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin, 1978, Chapter 10).

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