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Jason S. Ulsperger  
*Arkansas Tech University*

Jericho McElroy  
*Arkansas Tech University*

Haley Robertson  
*Arkansas Tech University*

Kristen Ulsperger  
*Arkansas Tech University*

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## Senior Companion Program Volunteers: Exploring Experiences, Transformative Rituals, and Recruitment/Retention Issues

Jason S. Ulsperger, Jericho McElroy, Haley Robertson, and Kristen Ulsperger  
Arkansas Tech University, Russellville, Arkansas, USA

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*Senior Companion Programs (SCPs) help the homebound elderly. They operate through local Area Agencies on Aging, but any nonprofit institution can apply for funding and operate a SCP. Program volunteers are 55 and older. They visit qualified elderly clients, which includes people who do not have the ability to fully care for themselves. Volunteers provide social interaction to clients, but they also provide a minimal level of services, such as grocery shopping, light housekeeping, and respite for caregivers. Examining the experiences of volunteers in these programs can help us better understand why actively engaging with others is important as we age. It can also help us establish a knowledge base that aids in our understanding of how to recruit and retain senior volunteers. This article uses data gathered from phenomenologically based, qualitative in-depth interviews of 10 SCP volunteers. Focusing on volunteer experiences, it uses structural ritualization theory to analyze various volunteer activities, which the research considers ritualized symbolic practices. It also considers how transformative rituals within a SCP impact volunteerism, and it provides recommendations on how to increase SCP volunteer recruitment and retain volunteers. The article concludes with suggestions for future research. Keywords: Elderly Volunteers, Active Aging, Senior Companion Programs, Area Agencies on Aging, Semi-Standardized Interviews*

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As countries like the United States experience an increase in their older populations, it will be important for researchers to qualitatively examine the lived experiences of the elderly to understand how their activities influence the aging process. This is especially true since the more an older person has social interaction with others; the better off the person is (Bradley, 2000). Consider a subset of activity known as volunteerism - organizational-based freely chosen actions with the goal of helping others (Snyder & Omoto, 2008).

The elderly traditionally volunteer in local institutions such as schools, libraries, churches, and nursing homes. They also participate in programs geared toward transportation, food, and childcare services (Scheibel, 1996). Though the number of hours elderly volunteers work varies significantly, rates of participation are high. Estimates indicate as many as 52 percent of older people perform some kind of volunteer service, and the number of elderly people volunteering is on the rise (Bradley, 2000; Dye, Goodman, Roth, & Jensen, 1973; Silva & Thomas, 2006). This is good because elderly volunteers report that they are happier than those who do not volunteer, have better life satisfaction, superior health, and even live longer (see Kahana, Bhatta, Lovegreen, Kahana, & Midlarsky, 2013; Kim & Ferraro, 2013; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003; Post & Neimark, 2006).

One volunteer program available for elders in the U. S. is the Senior Companion Program (SCP). Existing under Senior Corps, the SCP is a branch of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), a federal agency that connects Americans to volunteer opportunities. The larger SCP has smaller SCPs that operate through local Area Agencies on Aging (AAA), but any nonprofit institution can apply for funding and operate a SCP. Volunteers help qualified clients with simple daily tasks. This includes shopping, paying bills, light housekeeping, and respite services for family caregivers. More significant in terms

of activity perspectives, volunteers provide clients and themselves with needed social interaction. (CNCS, 2014).

Examining the experiences of elderly volunteers, such as those working for SCPs, can help us better understand why actively engaging with others is important as we age. It allows us to explore whether volunteer programs for the elderly promote rituals that transform an elderly person's identity as a volunteer. It can also help us better understand how to get and keep senior volunteers. This article uses qualitative data gathered from phenomenologically based in-depth interviews of SCP volunteers. It reviews their perspectives of volunteer work while revealing some of the benefits of volunteerism. It also considers transformative rituals within a SCP and issues of recruitment and retention. Research questions guiding this work included: Why do elders decide to volunteer in the first place? Why is volunteer activity important? How often do volunteers perceive themselves to be engaging in volunteerism? What does it mean to be a volunteer? Do volunteer programs engage in rituals that promote a self-awareness of volunteer status? Other questions focused on recruitment and retention, such as: What might attract more volunteers to the program? What can individual SCPs do to maintain adequate levels of volunteers?

### Theoretical Background

Structural ritualization theory (SRT) was used to explore various aspects of volunteer behaviors. SRT provides a social psychological foundation for discussing taken-for-granted *ritualized symbolic practices* (RSPs) of everyday life (Knottnerus, 1997). The theory implies symbolic rituals are a highly relevant aspect of interaction, especially when individuals are embedded in a larger context, such as an organization. Symbolic rituals shape thoughts and help to create social structure. Four RSP factors facilitate social structure - repetitiveness, salience, homologousness, and resources. *Repetitiveness* involves the frequency that people perform RSPs. *Salience* involves people viewing a RSP as important. *Homologousness* concerns the similarity between RSPs. *Resources* involve material or nonmaterial means people use to participate in RSPs. *Rank* is also key. A specific RSP has a high rank when it is repeated, prominent, similar to other rituals, and people have resources needed to perform it. The higher the rank of a RSP, the more likely it will shape people's cognitive frameworks and set the tone for behavior in their lives (Knottnerus, 2011). A new concept related to SRT is *transformative rituals* (TRs). A TR is a RSP that signifies a change in a person's identity and/or character via membership to a new group. TRs vary in terms of their impact, which relates to *degree of transformation* (DOT). Four factors influence DOT. This includes the rank of RSPs, collective events and emotions involving group members, how a *ritual legitimator*, someone in charge, evaluates group member performance, and collective pride coming from membership (Knottnerus, 2014).

Examining senior volunteer RSPs betters our understanding of people who are older that freely choose to help others. It allows us to hear about the benefits of volunteering from the people who actually do it, but seldom reflect on why or what it means to do it. It also allows us to give more legitimacy to the importance of being older and active. It gives people who operate senior volunteer programs, ritual legitimators, a better idea of how organizational TRs impact volunteers. It also provides them with ideas of how to get more volunteers and create stability within their organization by lowering turnover rates.

### Previous Research

## **Activity and Volunteering**

Literature shows that a wide variety of activities connected to social interaction produce positive outcomes for the aged. Employment, providing care for aged loved ones, grandparenting, and physical activity that takes place with others all improve general health, brain functioning, and mortality (Buchman, Wilson, & Bennett, 2008; Glass, Mendes de Leon, Bassuk, & Berkman, 2006; Hsu 2007; Janke, Payne, & Van Puymbroeck, 2008; Lennartsson & Silverstein, 2001). Studies typically focus on the benefits of one activity, though research is starting to consider the impact of engaging in multiple forms of activity on the elderly (see for example Fredriksen-Goldsen & Scharlach, 2006; Hinterlong, 2008; Jopp & Herzon 2010; Morrow-Howell et al., 2014). Specifically in terms of volunteering, the aged that do volunteer report that they are happier than those who do not (Morrow-Howell et al., 2003). They are more likely to have positive psychological dispositions and elevated life satisfaction (Kahana et al., 2013). They even have better levels of health, including reduced bodily inflammation associated with cardiovascular disease and hypertension (Kim & Ferraro, 2014). Benefits such as these continue when the elderly reach old age or have chronic health conditions (Okun, Rios, Crawford, & Levy, 2011). Research even shows that individuals over the age of 65 who start volunteering are more likely to live longer (Post & Neimark, 2008).

Previous research on SCPs shows activities performed by volunteers produce positive quality of life outcomes for both clients and volunteers by escalating reciprocal engagement (Rabiner et al., 2003). Activities within the program keep volunteers and clients systematically interacting with others through an expanded social network, and even aid in anxiety reduction (Butler, 2006). With volunteers having to be 55 and older, research indicates that the mutual understanding between volunteers and clients of the same age leads to deeper, meaningful relationships. (Butler & Eckart, 2008). Research shows that SCP volunteers value role flexibility and enjoy recognition from their work the most. They also value, though relatively small, monetary compensation and reimbursement checks (Hong & Morrow-Howell, 2013).

## **Structural Ritualization**

Varieties of recent studies support SRT. They include research on the impact of rituals on emotion (Knottnerus, 2010), coping with disaster (Bhandari, Okada, & Knottnerus, 2011), leadership practices within organizations (Lin, Guan, & Knottnerus, 2011) and disruptions in task groups (Sell, Knottnerus, & Adcock-Azbill, 2012). They also involve the ritual dynamics of carnivals (Edwards & Knottnerus, 2011), heavy metal subcultures (Meij, Probstfield, Simpson, & Knottnerus, 2013), and the deviant treatment of nursing home residents (Ulsperger & Knottnerus, 2013). There is one previous piece of research on SRT and volunteerism (see Mitra & Knottnerus, 2008). It argues that women who volunteer for nongovernmental organizations that push for women's rights in India engage in tasks through volunteerism that support existing gender based, structural inequalities. Interestingly, this includes RSPs that support traditional female qualities such as empathy, gentleness, and nurturance.

Previous research examines the positive outcomes of being older and active. Some of it focuses on volunteerism and SCPs. However, overall it fails to address volunteerism in old age in a systematic way with qualitative data and social psychological perspectives such as SRT. This research works toward helping fill that void.

## **Methodology**

### **Phenomenological Focus**

When a qualitative study focuses on humans acting and giving meaning to their actions, it is phenomenologically based. Studies in phenomenology consider interviewee interpretations of processes that give structure and importance to life. Often this involves knowledge embedded in organizational entities, in this case a SCP. Therefore, with phenomenological related research, it is important to focus on individuals and their activities, but also pay attention to the setting those individuals and activities exist within (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Morse, 1994). This approach is applicable to our research since it examines volunteer's perceptions of themselves and their work, and since SRT relates to the importance of individuals embedded in a wider social context.

This project aligns with requirements needed to establish phenomenological research (see Giorgi, 1997). This includes a focus on self-reflection with consideration of intentionality, such as motivations (e.g., Why did you decide to become a volunteer?), self-awareness (e.g., Why is volunteer activity important?), and meanings behind status and interaction (e.g., What does it mean to be a volunteer?). Most important in relation to SRT, phenomenological research concerns experiences aiding in the indexing reality (e.g., RSPs impacting the person's perceived status as a volunteer). It is also important to note that much of the existing research on volunteerism focuses solely on quantitative measures and ignores qualitative, phenomenological based issues (for a discussion see Yeung, 2004).

### **Program and Participants**

As mentioned previously, SCPs operate through local AAAs, but any nonprofit institution can apply for funding and establish one. Qualifying volunteers receive a stipend of \$2.65 per hour. They also receive reimbursement for mileage (.35 per mile) and an annual physical if they do not already have one covered by Medicare. To be a volunteer, you have to be 55 or older and live at an income of 125 percent of the poverty line or below (Butler & Eckart, 2008; CNCS, 2014). Volunteers serve an average of 20 hours per week. They tend to be younger elderly people, with only five percent being 85 or older (Silva & Thomas, 2006). Many local AAAs house SCPs, but other organizations, such as community based nonprofits and faith based groups, have the ability to receive CNCS funding and operate a SCP. Though requirements have fluctuated since the inception of the program, volunteers now go through a series of background checks, training in the SCP office (including policy, handbook, and code of ethics reviews), and shadow training with an already certified volunteer. Overall, volunteers go through approximately 40 hours of training before the program gives them clients (Riley, 2014).

A local AAA SCP director contacted the primary investigator (PI) because of the researcher's expertise in the field of social gerontology. The director was developing an advisory council for the program and wanted the PI as a member. Upon further discussion, the director asked the PI to collect data from actual volunteers related to their experiences working for the program in order to enhance the advisory council's understanding of the benefits of senior volunteering as it moved forward. The director wanted insight into what the program was or was not doing to make volunteers "feel" like volunteers. The director also wanted perspective on volunteer views of recruitment and retention (Riley, 2014).

The Area Agency on Aging supervising the program studied covers 10 counties in the southern United States. The area splits into two areas – a northern and southern area. It's SCP has 100 volunteers, most of which live in a city with a population of nearly 28,000 people seated in the northern area. The director wanted to target volunteers that the program had retained the longest. With the goal of selecting longtime volunteers, utilizing non-probability, purposive sampling was necessary. The director generated a list of volunteers and contacted

each about the study. After securing university Institutional Review Board approval, the PI interviewed everyone willing to participate (see Berg & Lune, 2014).

As shown in Table 1, 90 percent of the interviewees were female ( $n = 9$ ), with only one person identifying as male. Nine interviewees were white, with only one being an African American. The average age of interviewees was 73, with the youngest being 59 and the oldest 92. The average starting age for SCP volunteer work was 64, and average length of SCP service was 8.6 years. With statistics on all volunteers, more married people engage in volunteer work than those who are not married. The middle-aged skew these numbers since so many engage in activities related to volunteer work with their children (Silva & Thomas, 2006). Only one person was married, interestingly this interviewee was the oldest and only male. All other volunteers ( $n = 9$ ) were non-married females who all noted that they were not currently in any form of serious relationship.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the Interviewees\*

Item	Number	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>	10	100
Female	9	90
Male	1	10
<i>Race</i>	10	100
White	9	90
Other	1	10

\*Note: Average age was 73, with an average starting age of 64 and 8.6 years of service.

## The Interview Process

The director scheduled interviews, all of which took place in the local AAA office. The PI then met with interviewees on five separate days. Each face-to-face interview lasted approximately one hour, for a total of 10 hours worth of in-depth question and answer sessions. Semi-standardized interviews occurred. This involved the utilization of an interview schedule, but also provided the PI with the ability to probe beyond answers specifically related to questions (Berg & Lune, 2014). The first 10 minutes of interviews involved the collection of basic demographic information, with subsequent open-ended questioning on volunteer motivations and meanings, rituals and volunteer experiences, organizational TRs, and recruitment/retention issues. – see Table 2.

**Table 2.** Interview Questions

Topic Area
<i>Motivation and Meaning</i>
Why did you decide to volunteer?
What does it mean to you to be a volunteer?
<i>Volunteer Based Ritualized Practices</i>
How much time do you spend volunteering for the program every week?
How many different people do you help via the program?
What keeps you volunteering for the program?
Have you ever thought about stopping your volunteer work?
What aspect of volunteering is the most important to you?
Have you ever volunteered before this?
Do you volunteer for any other organizations?
Do you provide companionship or care for any elders outside of the SCP?
What personal resources does a good SCP volunteer need?

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*Transformative Rituals*

- Can you describe the training went through?
- Can you describe your ongoing training, such as monthly in-service meetings?
- Do you feel like you have a close bond with, or are friends with, other volunteers?
- Do you feel like you have a close bond with, or are friends with, your clients?
- Did you receive any sort of recognition, such as a certificate, after your training?
- Can you describe what takes place when you meet with your SCP supervisor?
- Do you feel like your supervisor appreciates you?
- Does the SCP provide public recognition for long-term volunteers?

*Recruitment and Retention*

- When did you first hear about the SCP?
  - What should the SCP do to recruit more volunteers?
  - What should the SCP do to retain its volunteers?
- 

**Interviewee Specific Issues**

Knowing interviewees would be 55+, and that prolonged questioning might lead to a certain amount of physical discomfort (see Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Riley, 2014), the PI notified interviewees that questioning could stop at any time and resume at a later point. Per the interview schedule, the PI also told interviewees that if any question created discomfort, the interview would stop. The PI then provided interviewees with a consent form. The form, among other things, emphasized that participation in the research was voluntary, ensured interviewees of confidentiality, and notified them they would not receive any compensation for participation. Following the IRB approved procedures, the PI notified interviewees that a copy of their consent form and a copy of a final report would be available upon request.

**Data Collection and Coding**

The PI recorded each interview via a voice recorder making each question and answer session an MP3 file. Following data collection, co-investigators transcribed the MP3 recordings after the PI removed identifiable information. They also titled each *interview* participant with a numerical identifier, Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, etc., for researchers to use in discussions of content themes. Though the PI based content themes on questions asked to rule out bias, other researchers independently analyzed secondary information that emerged from core questions in the interview schedule and eventually came to a consensus on where that information fit with other coded content (Berg & Lune, 2014).

**Results****Motivation and Meaning of Volunteerism**

Alleviating loneliness motivates the elderly to volunteer. With reasons for volunteering, four of the interviewees noted receiving benefits from volunteer interactions because they were lonely. Volunteering fills a psychological void. In all of these cases, interviewees mentioned loneliness following the death of a family member. Two interviewees noted that they simply like volunteering. Two implied they volunteer for the benefit of extra income. One commented, "I was retiring from daycare... I wanted a little extra money." Two provided no reason for volunteering.

With questions on the meaning of volunteerism, a clear pattern relating to the benefits of activity and the reciprocal nature of volunteerism emerged. A majority of respondents discussed the meaning of volunteerism as helping themselves *and* others. One stated, "It gives

the caregiver a chance to get out and take care of business, and they don't have to take their person with them... It gets me out of the house every day!" Another said:

Well, you're fulfilling [people's] lives. My [client], I had to go to her this morning before I come here. She's in a wheelchair, and she's 87 years old... Anyway, she depends on someone to come visit her. I said let's take your shower today; she gets it Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. She said, "No you'll be late for your meeting." And I said, "Look, they can wait on us." I made her bed 'cause she can't, when she strips it, she can't get it back on together because it's heavy... Like all my clients, like she knows all my family, my husband, and all [my] relatives... [I love helping people like her] because it gives you fulfillment that you've done something... That's what we do; just learn to help people out.

Another pointed out, "It means a lot to me because I'm by myself. It means I can be with somebody for four hours, instead of staying home watching TV. I get out and help other people." One respondent said, "I [fall] in love with [people I help]. I take them to the grocery store, the doctor, and Wal-Mart. It benefits me just as much as it benefits them. It gives me something to do."

### **Volunteer Based Ritualized Symbolic Practices**

**Repetitiveness.** Again, with SRT, repetitiveness concerns the frequency in which people engage in a RSP. With this study, respondents have an average of 2.7 clients and spend an average of 22.4 hours per week engaged in volunteer based rituals. The low end of a volunteer's client load was one and the high end five (the maximum number allowed by the SCP). The low end of volunteer hours was 12 and the high end 40 hours. When asked about what keeps them volunteering, six respondents could not think of an answer. The desire to help other people was the response from two interviewees. One noted that the benefit of a "flexible" schedule with volunteer work is essential for people looking to be older and active. Relating to previous points on motivation, another said that "having companionship and something to do" was the key benefit that elevated her desire to volunteer on a frequent basis. The follow-up question to this issue asked interviewees if they ever thought about stopping volunteer work. A "no" response occurred with all but one interviewee.

For those who said "no," seven stated that declining health would be the only thing that would slow down or stop their volunteer work. The volunteer work can help you stay healthy longer, unhealthy people do volunteer significantly less (Silva & Thomas, 2006). Two stated that the only thing that would make them stop volunteering was if a supervisor fired them. For the only one person that discussed serious consideration of ending his volunteer work, the reason was to have more time to spend with his wife. She resides in a local nursing home. The interviewee commented:

Well, I did almost stop this year. I really thought about it. My wife being in the nursing home and all, I thought maybe I might spend a little more time with her. I go out there now at 2:00 in the evening and stay 'til they put her to bed. That's four or five hours. The early morning, you go out there and you're kind of in their way. They're cleaning and getting them up. I found out that's not a good time for me to go. So, I think probably the time I'm going is about as much as I really need to spend with her. We've been married 70 years, week before last we had our 70<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.



**Salience.** This SRT factor involves perceived importance of ritualized behavior. Here, respondents answered a question on what aspects of volunteerism are most important to them. If you receive gratification from helping others, SCP volunteer work can benefit you. Six interviewees focused on RSPs of helping other people with comments like, “The most important thing is what I do for them,” “Being able to help other people [is most important],” and “I get to help other people.” Two respondents did not identify an important aspect of the program to them. One noted that performing work tasks was most important to her. Implying aspects of physically helping others is a beneficial activity, she stated:

There’s just so many little things [that are important to me]... Making the bed, doing laundry... One lady, she had her back door latch broke. So I took it out, it didn’t take two minutes. I took it to [a local hardware store] and got another one and put it in for her... Little things like that [are just as important as] companionship.

**Homologousness.** This SRT factor relates to similarities between RSPs. This project concerns itself with similarities between volunteer rituals and those existing outside of the scope of formal volunteer duties. To explore this, inquiries involved whether volunteers had ever volunteered before, whether they currently volunteered elsewhere, and whether they provided any form of homebound care for people not associated with a formal organization.

When asked if you now volunteer, or have ever volunteered, for another organization, seven people indicated that SCP work was the only form of volunteerism they had ever engaged in throughout life. One of these interviewees argued “I worked for the health department,” but conceded that since it was a regular paid job, it did not qualify as volunteerism. Two respondents noted that they considered church activities volunteer work. The remaining respondent stated, “I [volunteered] for the Red Cross when we lived in Florida... You know, a lot of [old] people move to Florida... The husband dies and ladies don’t drive, so I worked for the Red Cross taking them to doctor’s appointments.”

A theme involving caring existed in the responses. Out of all respondents, seven interviewees stated they provide homebound care to others outside of the parameters of a formal organization. A majority of those provide minor levels of care for friends, especially church friends. Explaining the benefits of this activity, one interviewee stated:

I’ve got some people from our church I do help. I help them do things. I get more from it probably than they do. They appreciate it. All of them appreciate what I do. Right now, these two ladies, they both had back surgeries, and they can’t mop or vacuum. I run the mop for them, I vacuum, and I do little light things around the house for them. I go out and take their trash out, and sit and talk to them for about 20 minutes when I get there. I have a cup of coffee with them before I leave.

One said she provides care for her aged sister, who actually used to be one of her clients. Another indicated that she does a lot to help her aged sister take care of her husband. Reflecting the idea that volunteer work can not only make you feel needed, but also important, she elaborated:

Well, I had to help my sister take care of her husband. He had to do dialysis and things. He had dementia. I don’t know if he had Alzheimer’s, but he had dementia, which is a little different. There was certain times that his son would

walk through the house, and he would actually say, “Who is this guy? Who is this guy?” But, any time I drove up in that driveway, he run to the front door. Why? Because I brought him fruit. Every time I come, I brought him watermelon, cantaloupe, fruit of some kind... So, he knew me. On his dying bed [he called my name]... Nobody else’s name did he call.

Of the three not providing any form of homebound care outside of formal organizational parameters, one explained that though she did not help anyone personally, several family members make up her SCP client base (which is within the regulations of the program).

**Resources.** SRT based resources involve anything a person needs to engage adequately in RSPs. Questioning for this project revolved around what personal resources interviewees believe make someone a good volunteer. With resources, seven of the interviewees implied that being relatable and having a good personal temperament is the most important tool for a good volunteer. These respondents all implied they had these resources and without them you cannot reap the benefits of volunteer work. One interviewee noted, “[Volunteers] have to be able to associate with [others]. Be able to have [similar life] experience.” Another stated, “[Volunteers must] have patience.” Yet another contended, “You have to be kind of patient.” One explained:

You need to cope with people. Coping with other people is kinda hard. I ain’t gonna tell nobody it’s easy. Everybody you go to is different. Sometimes I go to [a client’s] house, and I ask them how they feel and everything. They say, “I want you to take me to the store.” And if they can’t see and [you have to figure out what they need], it’s hard to figure out what they want. Cause, okay, if you get flour, all flour is different. They want a certain kind of flour, that’s hard. They want what they want and you gotta figure out what it is.

In a related statement, another respondent stated that a good volunteer needs the ability to “Be able to go into [a client’s] home and look around and see what needs to be done, instead of waiting for them to tell you what needs to be done.” One respondent implied the most important resource for a good volunteer is just to, “Care about other people.” Another took a logistical approach contending the most important volunteer resources are “your own vehicle, license, and insurance.”

### **SCP Volunteerism as a Transformative Ritual**

**Rank.** Rank is a compiled evaluation of a set of RSPs based on the four factors associated with SRT (Knottnerus, 1997). The aspects of SRT and volunteerism previously reviewed imply that features of SCP work may be somewhat transformative for the people involved. For example, in terms of repetitiveness, a theme exists where volunteers spend a relatively large amount of time per week providing services to others. With salience, many believe that helping others is an important part of their identity as a volunteer. Considering homologousness, many interviewees noted that they regularly help others, not just organizational clients, in homebound situations. With resources, it is clear that the long-term volunteers in this study believe they have the appropriate personal disposition to be good SCP volunteers. However, several interviewees noted they never volunteered before and the narratives studied create the impression that volunteers see the rituals they perform through volunteer work as just an extension of who they already were before becoming volunteers. They certainly do not come across as people who would list out descriptors of who they are

and place “volunteer” as a significant sense of self very high on the list. They just happen to be lonely, helpful, patient people working within the context of a volunteer organization.

**Collective Emotions with Group Members.** Collective emotions involve events that carry an emotional tone with the ability to influence a person’s sense of identity and/or group membership (Knottnerus, 2014). Further hindering the transformative development of SCP workers as identifiable “volunteers,” is the lack of collective emotions experienced by group members. SCP workers casually discuss training, unlike fields like law enforcement where group members perceive training as a significant transformative event (Ness, 1991). Perhaps comparing SCP training to police training is an unfair assessment, but it is striking that in this research, when asked about training, interviewees had such lax responses, if any response at all. Respondents have to go through 40 hours of training, but some noted that they did not “receive much training,” there was “no training,” and “there was a few days, but really no training.” Interviewees also implied that SCP volunteers seldom build significant relationships with other volunteers through initial training or monthly in-service training. Many interviewees did not know the name of the person who trained them. Respondents noted, “The person I trained with still volunteers,” “It’s been a while since I’ve seen that [person] that trained me,” and “[I] went with some volunteer to kind of show [me] what [I could] do and not do.” Another volunteer stated, “Once a month we have a meeting. I know most of the other volunteers, but do not have [a close relationship with] them.” Reflecting a lack of collective emotions, only two interviewees systematically discussed the rigors of training and recalled volunteers who trained, or trained with them, by name.

In terms of monthly in-service training, only eight respondents report being acquainted with other volunteers who attend meetings. Comments indicated, “[Volunteers] visit sometimes,” “We pass each other and say, *Hi*, [but] really don’t have that much time,” and “There’s [another volunteer] that I see [and] sometimes I speak to her personally, but it’s usually about the job.” Another noted, “I’m more friends with my church people [than other volunteers], but my best friend used to be a volunteer here. We stay in contact every day.” Implying benefits of social bonds with others working in the program, the two respondents that stated they are close to other volunteers noted, “[I] know the girls in the office... [One] girl that’s down there now... I trained her... Most of them are good friends” and “I’ve maintained friendships with [other volunteers].”

The research did address the bonds between volunteers and clients, which surprisingly seem stronger than volunteer-to-volunteer bonds. Nine volunteers implied emotional attachments to clients. Interestingly, while discussions of the benefits of companionship with clients took place, when discussing attachments to clients here, a majority of volunteers commented on the impact of client death as an emotional disadvantage of SCP volunteering. One interviewee discussed the sadness of having a client who “died in” her arms. She subsequently built off of a previous in-service question stating, “I don’t think our in-service meetings have ever covered death issues. Most of them are like heart problems, hearing problems, um just ordinary things... That would be a good one.” Another said, “I get emotionally attached. It’s a bad thing when they have to pass away. That’s a hard thing... And all at once they’re gone.” One respondent did seem well adjusted to the idea of client death commenting, “You get sort of a detachment. I’ve had several pass away... It doesn’t just totally destroy you because you know they were old and some of them were pretty sick. You know, you could see it coming.” One benefit of volunteering is that it reduces anxiety (see Butler, 2006). Regardless, one person implied that the constant anxiety of client death is problematic for her. She explained, “Every time I hear sirens, I think...don’t go to [the housing complex where my clients live]... In fact, there was a [client of mine] that he spent a lot of time in the hospital, and [worrying about him] every time I hear a siren, I hope it’s not [for him].” With the two clients that did not mention death, one discussed a client who was her friend that went

to church with her and another infantilized her relationship with clients stating, “When you take care of one, it’s just like taking care of a baby. Which a lot of them are, even if when you first take them over they are not, they develop on up in to [dementia], and it’s just like taking care of a baby.”

**Performance Evaluation.** This TR factor involves an evaluation by a person in charge within the group, known as a ritual legitimator (Knottnerus, 2014). Any supervisor within the SCP qualifies as a ritual legitimator. Something respondents responded to was a question about recognition after training completion. One interviewee thought she received some sort of certificate after training, but the rest noted that they did not receive any sort of recognition after training. Comments ranged from, I did not get anything “other than a nametag” to, they only give you “a badge.” Looking for insight on supervisor acknowledgement, a follow-up question concerned what takes place when meeting with program supervisors. Four of the interviewees said conversations about client issues and paperwork typically take place. Three did not give any indication of what takes place. Two said work talk occurred, but also personal conversation transpired. One person noted that supervisor meetings sometimes have the benefit of resolving personal problems volunteers are experiencing. She stated:

[I] have a personal relationship [with one supervisor]. When [she] first came here, I said, “Well, I’m gonna tell you... I love my clients, and I do the best I can, but don’t pull my strings, ‘cause I do the best I can... She just laughed, and so that’s why she calls me “meanie,” or something like that, all the time. She and I have a real good relationship... I had one of those call buttons, well it didn’t work out, so I wanted to get one through [the AAA]. But anyway, I could not get rid of the first one I had. I’d never opened it. Never took it out of the box! [The supervisor] personally called the Better Business Bureau and got it taken care of. They took it back, ‘cause it had never even been opened... She does outside her duty. It brings a real bond.”

When asked about supervisor appreciation, six of respondents noted that one benefit of volunteering is that they consistently receive appreciative recognition. In responding to this line of questioning, one person noted that supervisors are “like family.” Another stated, “The oldest [supervisor appreciates volunteers]. Oh, she pretty well knows [everyone] in the program.” One exclaimed, “Oh gosh, they’re very appreciative. [I] get very little criticism, far as I’ve noticed... They are always saying, “Well, we couldn’t do it without you girls. And you know that kind of thing.”

**Collective Pride.** This aspect of TR involves a high or inordinate opinion of group dignity grounded in shared practices. It specifically can involve rituals of recognition for group members (Knottnerus, 2014). The line of questioning here involved an inquiry into whether any sort of rituals related to the SCP recognized continuing, or long-term, volunteerism. Seven respondents proudly discussed a benefit of personal pride from yearly recognition meetings and public presentations of certificates and/or awards. One claimed, “I’ve got so many certificates! I got President’s certificate from the President Bush. I found it the other day.” Another stated, “I got the Achievement Award, Governor’s Award, and President’s Award. I was the main senior companion that year.” Mixing in comments on financial benefits, another stated:

They give out awards once a year also. I think it’s like Christmas or Thanksgiving that they will have a catered in-service, and then they have an awards ceremony once a year too. Sometimes you get a money order or Wal-Mart gift card. They used to give a little pin with numbers on it. Every year

you'd get a bigger number when you'd been there longer but they haven't been able to locate those numbers. They haven't done that lately.

A less enthusiastic respondent, not appearing to care about emotional fulfillment said, "They give you a little pin. A year one, year two. I don't know... They could give us a raise." Another argued the program should bring back an old practice of having retreats for volunteers. Relating directly to the benefits of being older and interacting with others, She explained:

They used to do a whole lot for us. Well, they used to take us on these kind of retreat things, where we'd go to the parks and spend two or three nights and we'd have meetings like at a state park. We'd get to stay, and we'd have a speaker there. That was so much fun. We were all together. We'd have little plays and programs, and you know they'd come even from, I guess the district, people that we never saw; they would come out for these. We had the best time... We also did educational things we got certificates for. They would just put a list of stuff that was going to be happening for the day, and you chose where you wanted to go. When you went and went through this class and everything, and we would get certificates for that... I miss that, because the only thing we have now is we have our Christmas thing.

One interviewee was unsure about public recognition. She thought the program rewarded long-term service with "a ribbon." One respondent had no comment on recognition for continued service. One stated that she did not think the program did anything to recognize long-term service.

### **Recruitment and Retention**

Three interviewees initially heard about the SCP via formal outlets – a newspaper advertisement, information provided by a local Senior Center, and literature provided by hospice. One respondent noted:

My husband passed away five years ago and he had hospice... After he passed away, the hospice had some pamphlets they gave me, and one of them was for Area Agency on Aging. I stuck it in my cupboard, and then a couple weeks later I thought, well, I need to get out and do something, so I rummaged around and found that and went down to the office. That's how I found out! Actually, it was hospice handed out pamphlets that said Area Agency on Aging Senior Companion Program.

The remaining seven volunteers first heard about the program on their own. One first heard about the program through a visit with a stranger at the doctor's office and another through a family friend. All other interviewees initially became aware of the program through family contacts, one through a sister, one because her daughter worked for the AAA, and two through some relationship associated with their deceased husbands. One respondent claimed that she was just looking through the local telephone book for job contacts. She stated:

I looked through the phone book, 'cause my son had passed away quite unexpectedly. So, I ended up with no income [and] was looking for a job. I applied here and there. I looked through the phonebook, just calling. The [Area Agency on Aging] was the first ones that gave me an opportunity. 'Cause I

basically really don't have no skills, things like that. I think I saw it in the phone book and just looked it up, you know just calling different places trying to find some kind of job somewhere to get some type of income coming in, and they were the first ones that gave me the opportunity.

When asked what they would do to recruit more volunteers, the most prominent theme involved brochure placement. With this theme, four of the interviewees recommended better placement of SCP literature on community bulletin boards or at information booths in low-income housing areas, churches, drugstores, and local fairs. Social events integrating the community came up with three of respondents. Here, two interviewees noted that some sort of open-house meeting where the public could come to the AAA offices, get literature, and hear people, such as current volunteers, speak about the program would be a good idea. Acknowledging community-based yard sales held by the AAA, one respondent noted that the SCP did not do a good enough job of disseminating materials during such events. The interviewee strongly stated, "They need to give out pamphlets when we have a yard sale." Two interviewees did not provide suggestions on recruitment. One said, "word of mouth" is the best recruitment tool. Another stated that the SCP should find a way to target people who have recently lost significant others. The respondent said, "When people lose their husband or their wife and are kind of at loose ends... [That] is a good time to get people."

On the question of suggestions to improve the retention of volunteers, respondents provided a wide variety of responses, though four did cite a need to raise the hourly stipend and mileage reimbursement. Two interviewees stated that the SCP is fine as is and does not need to do anything to improve recruitment. One stated that even if the program could change policies to improve recruitment, it did not matter. Dedication to the program comes down to personal commitment. The respondent argued, "It's more or less, it's got to be in [your] blood... If you get it in your blood, it's not like a job." One implied the program needs more activities to build bonds between volunteers other than the monthly in-service training sessions. Another questioned the quality of in-service training sessions by stating:

Well, I don't know. They really try, the coordinators and supervisors, they really try to keep everybody interested. In our [in-service meetings], they have different people from programs to come and explain things to us like Medicare and insurance. A lot of [volunteers] don't understand. I don't understand a lot of it. They have a lot [of that] at our meetings.

One interviewee noted a desire for better volunteer-client matching. The respondent stated that program supervisors set up matching based on geographic factors, but personality traits might be something to consider in the future. People end up interacting with people they do not get along with and the positive benefits of the interaction fail to exist. She argued:

I'm a kind of 90% time jolly, happy-go-lucky person. I love to cut up and things like that. You don't want to put somebody in there with a grouch. Now it is based on area-wise to keep mileage down because of government. Don't let me get on that. Helping match some people together, 'cause there are volunteers that have attitudes, which we all do at times, but just kind of help matching the people sometimes would help... I just had to assign [one of my clients] to another lady... She's a grouch... Everybody's not doing something right, or they just don't do anything. They're asking too many questions. They're getting into stuff that doesn't belong to them... [She thinks someone is going to] steal

something and take something... So, I think compatibility helps on some things. That helps a whole lot. But, you can't always do that.

### **Conclusion**

According to this study, one factor in the motivation for elderly to engage in volunteer work is loneliness. This is probably due to deteriorating social networks, specifically situations involving the death of a loved one. Volunteering for an organization such as the SCP provides someone in this situation the ability to interact with others and the benefit of developing a psychological sense of purpose.

Elderly volunteers in this study are more than willing to work a significant number of hours per week as long as the benefit of positive companionship is present, the schedule is flexible, and health issues do not slow them down. Freely choosing to help others through a program like the SCP is important to elderly volunteers because they benefit themselves by way of financial gain and the aforementioned sense of purpose. However, in this study, the most important benefit the elderly report from their experiences with volunteerism seems to be an elevated level of altruistic pleasure gained from helping others. It is not surprising then that respondents reported having previous jobs where they helped others or that they ritualistically engage in care giving outside of the SCP setting. Interestingly, elderly volunteers have a high level of self-awareness about their disposition. They recognized that engaging in volunteer rituals is only a successful experience for volunteers when they have the resource of a personal disposition geared toward coping, patience, and caring.

With TRs, it is clear that SCP workers engage in high-ranking rituals that relate to a volunteer identity, but they do not really seem to see themselves as volunteers or belonging to a group of other volunteers. SCP supervisors praise workers adequately and the program provides group recognition on a yearly basis. However, the collective bonds and collective pride needed to make SCP workers see themselves as a group of volunteers, and not just individuals who happen to be volunteering, is missing. Elevating the degree of transformation into volunteerism with a more meaningful nature of initial training, and through monthly in-service meetings, is worth considering if it can produce benefits associated with being older and active. Moreover, focusing on topics related to emotional aspects of care giving, such as the negative aspects of infantilization in care giving might prove relevant. Considering a topic like loss and grief might also be pertinent. This is especially true since a theme associated with client death and anxiety as a disadvantage of volunteering emerged in this study.

One goal of this research was to explore recruitment and retention issues with elderly volunteers. This project implies that certain volunteers are more likely to find out about SCP volunteer opportunities through informal social networks. Therefore, organizations like the SCP need to do a better job of attracting volunteers through formal means or take resources used for public advertising and channel them in a better direction. In terms of formal outlets specifically related to the SCP studied, moving beyond television advertisements on public access networks and newspaper advertisements might be necessary. Consider having open houses at the AAA offices with booths presenting AAA literature available in locations not traditionally associated with SCP advertising. This includes doctors' offices, drugstores, and low-income housing projects. Since volunteers report having worked in occupations where they helped others, such as nursing homes, daycares, and the health department, put literature in those locations. Targeting people who work for such organizations that are retiring could be advantageous. Regardless, SCPs should certainly continue to provide literature via traditional outlets through senior centers and hospice. The literature should definitely highlight the benefits of being older and active. It might be a good idea to have quotes or stories from current volunteers that discuss advantages of volunteer work. With a reliance on informal networks to

generate volunteers, SCPs should create innovative ways to spread the word that qualified aged people can even take care of family members within the confines of the program and supplement their incomes.

Once SCPs attract more volunteers, they should do better with retention. Long-term volunteers in this study argued SCPs need to do something to increase stipends and mileage reimbursements. Another recommendation is to do a better job of matching volunteers and clients based on disposition. While maintaining the necessity of geographic alignment, perhaps implementing some form of emotional intelligence testing to match people based on personal disposition would help. This research contributes to existing literature that examines the positive outcomes of being older and active. It specifically adds to the existing studies of elderly volunteerism and SCPs with a systematic review of qualitative data from a phenomenological based, social psychological perspective. Future research should focus on other qualitative methodologies to study volunteer work and the benefits of it amongst the aged. It should also consider exploring themes of companionship and roles of care giving associated with a volunteer status. In relation to the current study's limitations, future work needs to interview larger numbers of volunteers and interview volunteers from various programs, not just those involved with the AAA. Agreeing with phenomenological and SRT perspectives, the embedded nature of our interviewee group certainly influenced their responses. If embedded in another organization, would different results emerge? For example, would the results be different in this project if it analyzed a SCP operating through a local church? Focus group methods might prove beneficial with this line of research. Discussing issues in a room with other volunteers might generate previously undiscovered issues. Moreover, future researcher could also use the themes developed in this qualitative piece and design a quantitative survey. With an adequate random and representative sample, this would allow an opportunity to better generalize information relating to SCP volunteers or elderly volunteers within other programs.

The elderly population in the U.S., and in other countries around the world, is on the rise. Though this transition is interesting on demographic merits alone, the social and policy issues stimulated by this shift are fascinating. Stereotypes promote the idea that large numbers of unhappy and physically deteriorating aged people will drain resources from social systems. However, the aged can obviously be healthy and happy, and they can undoubtedly contribute by way of, among other things, volunteer work. Wherever there are elderly people, there are people who want to help others (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). As this study indicates, finding them and engaging them in volunteer activities can benefit them, as well as those they serve.

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### Author Note

Dr. Jason S. Ulsperger is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Arkansas Tech University, where he teaches social gerontology. He received his B.S. from the University of Central Arkansas and M.A. from Arkansas State University. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology from Oklahoma State University. His article in *Sociological Spectrum*, "The Social Dynamics of Elder Care," recently won the Mid-South Sociological Association's award for publication of the year. Along with his book *Elder Care Catastrophe: Rituals of Abuse in*

*Nursing Homes*, Ulsperger is the co-editor of three oral history collections involving elders living in the Arkansas River Valley. He is a recent recipient of Arkansas Tech University's Faculty Award for Teaching and the Faculty Award for Scholarship and Creative Activity.

Jericho McElroy is a graduate student at Arkansas Tech University, where he received a B.A. in Sociology. His research interests involve symbolic interaction theory. He is currently developing a biographical piece on Erving Goffman's contributions to social psychology.

Haley Robertson is a graduate student at Arkansas Tech University. She holds a B.A. in Communications. She is currently interested in researching public relations issues for institutions involving elderly populations and the victims' rights movement

Kristen Ulsperger is a Visiting Instructor of Sociology at Arkansas Tech University. She received a B.S. from the University of Central Arkansas and a M.A. in sociology from Arkansas State University. Before teaching, she worked as a consultant and as a researcher for a variety of non-profit organizations.

Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Jason S. Ulsperger at [julsperger@atu.edu](mailto:julsperger@atu.edu).

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