



Association of volunteering with mental well-being: a lifecourse analysis of a national population-based longitudinal study in the UK

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Overview

This paper comprises research into the link between volunteering and mental well-being over the life course, using data collected in the British Household Panel Survey. They find that the positive relationship between voluntary activity and mental well-being becomes well-established from the age of 40. The authors recommend that more be done to encourage 40+ year olds to volunteer in order to protect well-being in the later stages of life.

Background

Many of the previous studies into the association between volunteering and mental well-being tend to focus on particular age groups. For example, it has been found that over 65-year olds' mental health benefits from volunteering. Considering a lack of evidence regarding the benefits for younger age groups, it could be assumed that the benefits are universal regardless of age. However, this study seeks to address this gap in the literature by approaching the topic from a life course perspective, including a wider spectrum of ages and following them over the course of 12 years.

Methodology

This investigation comprises an analysis of the British Household Panel Survey data, a longitudinal survey completed by a sample of 5000 households in Britain. The data collected is from 15+ year olds from 1991 to 2008. This allows for the analysts to observe the volunteering and wellbeing trajectory of the individuals of the years, rather than focusing on a particular age group. Data was only collected on volunteering in 7 of the 18 waves: 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008. Data from the other waves, not including information on volunteering, was irrelevant and thus discarded for this analysis. Having discarded further datasets where information was incomplete, the final sample totalled 66,343 individuals.

The data on volunteering frequency is considered the main explanatory variable for this investigation. The authors merged the 5 responses provided in the questionnaire into 4: frequent (once a week), infrequent (merge of several times a year and once a month), rare (once a year or less) and never. To measure mental wellbeing, the authors use the General Health Questionnaire section of the survey, which comprises 12 questions concerning wellbeing, happiness and mental distress. The respondents can choose one of four answers. The authors then apply a Likert scale of 0 to 36 to each respondent according to their results, where the higher the number, the higher the mental distress. Age is used as a continuous variable, and other variables under consideration include income, gender, education level, marital status, etc.

The authors do comment on the robustness of the data, citing that the data has been used extensively in health research. The sample size is also substantial, although they consider that the period for the longitudinal survey is relatively short. Furthermore, they do point out that there is only one question asked concerning volunteering, and the respondent's understanding of voluntary activity is not probed. They are obliged to consider the data as addressing only "formal volunteering", and thus acknowledge that lower estimates of voluntary activity are possible.

Findings

The findings support the authors' hypothesis that the association between volunteering and mental well-being changes over the life course. They found that there was no clear positive relationship between the two variables in early and mid-adulthood, but the positive correlation begins at around 40 years of age. It is suggested that this is a result of the "obligation" to volunteer to be well-rounded and successful. Yet, as age increases, people are more likely to become involved in voluntary activity, possibly owing to social connections, for example, school-related volunteering, thanks to their children. The authors suggest that further research into the reasoning behind these differences throughout the life course would be pertinent.