

May 23-26, 2017

CCLR15 Book of Proceedings

Crowne Plaza Hotel, Kitchener ON



ENGAGING LEGACIES | UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO
15th canadian congress on leisure research 2017

Making change, making meaning: Volunteering during the transition to retirement

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The trend toward an aging population in Canada is expected to continue over the next two decades (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). In the fall of 2015, Statistics Canada reported the number of Canadians over 65 had surpassed the number of Canadians under 15 (Statistics Canada, 2015). The aging demographic in Canada represents potential opportunities, among them being the potential for a significant increase in the number of older adults who choose to volunteer; a prospective boost for organizations which rely on volunteers to operate in a landscape of increasingly scarce external funding (Kelly & Harding, 2004). At this time, only about 35% of Canadian adults over the age of 55 choose to volunteer (Turcotte, 2015). Despite this low rate, research shows that volunteering in retirement has significant positive health benefits (Komp, van Tilburg, & van Groenou, 2012), and provides older adults with a meaningful way to connect with others, build self-worth, and enhance their sense of community (Cousineau, Misener, & Berbary, 2016; Iwasaki, Messina, Shank, & Coyle, 2015). Previous works on older adult volunteers have used role, activity, continuity, and life course theories to explain volunteer behaviour (e.g. Chambré, 1984; Morrow-Howell, 2007). While these social psychological theories provide insight into volunteer behaviour, they do not adequately explain how older adults experience meaning through volunteering. The aim of this study was to explore the meaning of volunteering in the lives of adults over the age of 55 as they transition into retirement. Specifically, this research addressed the following research questions: (i) What role does the volunteer experience play in meaning-making during the transition to retirement among older adults?; and (ii) What organizational practices might be improved in order to facilitate more meaningful volunteer experiences for older adults during their transition to retirement? One-on-one, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 adults over 55 who were engaged in regular volunteering with a small non-profit organization in their community. Participants had retired within the last 5 years, or were in transition to full retirement from career work.

Analysis of the data revealed six primary themes which contributed to the meaning of volunteering for older adults as they transitioned to retirement: (1) role identity through the transition to retirement, which included the need for autonomy and personal challenge; (2) confronting aging, health, and dying; (3) the complexities of time use in retirement; (4) facing fear/anxiety about transitioning to retirement, including the loss of purpose and the loss of personal connections; (5) the influence of finances on volunteer decisions; and (6) making a difference in people's lives, including deriving personal value from helping others and helping in the community. The presentation will outline each of these concepts as independent and inter-related contributors to meaning-making for older adults as they volunteer in transition to retirement. The presentation will also discuss the findings related to organizational

improvements and how these might be used to inform future practice across a variety of non-profit organizational landscapes.

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