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# An “Army of Volunteers”? Engagement, Motivation, and Barriers to Volunteering among the Baby Boomers

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## ABSTRACT

Aging baby boomers are expected to provide a large reservoir for the nonprofit sector. We find evidence which while broadly supportive of this idea also suggest limitations as to what can realistically be expected. Using data from the third (2017) wave of the Norwegian life-course, aging, and generation study ( $n = 2,993$ , age 53–71), we find that a sizable proportion is already engaged (65–68% in the past year) and around half of non-volunteers (from 58% among the youngest to 43% among the oldest) express interest in volunteering. However, most volunteering is sporadic and less than half of volunteers participate on a weekly basis. Furthermore, most of the non-volunteers who express interest seem unlikely to realize their interest as they simultaneously report important motivational and ability-related barriers to volunteering. A further challenge is that few boomers are willing to make a major commitment to volunteering. Findings suggest that to mobilize boomers, nonprofit organizations need to accommodate more self-interested and flexible forms of involvement.

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voluntary work; barriers; active aging; baby boomers; reflexivity

## Background

Retiring baby boomers – the generation born between 1946 and 1964 – are expected to represent a potential boon to the voluntary sector. The boomers are entering their later years more numerous and better educated, healthier, and with greater resources than previous generations. At a time of rapid population aging, Western governments aim to harness the resources and skills of this generation and to promote “active aging” (Walker & Maltby, 2012). Key to this strategy is stimulating and enabling older people to contribute in voluntary work – unpaid work to people outside of the household. The sheer size of the baby boom generation means that recruiting even a small percentage of them for meaningful volunteerism could have a profound impact on local communities and on society as a whole.

What remains unclear, however, is what can be done to realize the boomers’ potential in this regard and to what extent they want to engage

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in volunteering. Some argue that their high education level, history of involvement social and political activism, and high levels of current volunteering indicate that aging boomers will direct their activity toward volunteering (Freedman, 1999; Steinhorn, 2006). On the other hand, boomers are also viewed as a more “selfish” generation, with a zeal for conspicuous consumption, foreign travel, and individual pursuits (Phillipson et al., 2008). It has been argued that their high levels of hedonistic and individualistic values and low levels of religious involvement will cause boomers to volunteer less and be more oriented toward adventure, hobbies, and leisure activities than previous generations in their retirement (Goss, 1999; Putnam, 2000). In light of the widespread speculation, it is remarkable that research remains sparse on boomers’ interest in volunteering in their retirement years (Einolf, 2009). The main objective of this paper is thus to shed light on this issue by exploring different aspects of boomers’ involvement in and motivation for voluntary work.

### ***Able, willing, and allowed?***

To mobilize large numbers of boomers several preconditions must be met: The boomers need to possess the required resources (i.e. be *able*), to be motivated (i.e. *willing*), and to be appreciated and welcomed (i.e. *allowed*). Finally, there needs to be a reasonable fit between what seniors can do and want and what voluntary organizations need and can provide.

In many ways the postwar generations seem increasingly better able to contribute because they are living longer and with better health and cognitive functions than previous generations (Christensen et al., 2013). They will also be more technologically savvy and have more experience with the internet, which not only opens up a broader range of ways to contribute but also facilitates the search for attractive volunteering options. Importantly too, the next generations of older adults – and women especially – will be better educated. Education has been found to be a consistent predictor of volunteering, even when its correlates are controlled (Goss, 1999), which suggests that education may promote voluntarism in ways beyond its role in fostering social capital and better health – for example, by shaping values, interests, and mentality (Hustinx et al., 2010). Furthermore, higher education is tied to a more active coping style and individual agency (Slagsvold & Sørensen, 2008), which may predict a more proactive and efficacious orientation toward seeking out meaningful engagements after retirement.

It remains unclear, however, whether seniors’ engagement will be directed toward the community or toward more self-oriented interests and pleasures. After retirement boomers may prefer *freedom* from obligations and commitments to taking on new ones. Indeed, volunteering does not seem to be high on the list of priorities for people approaching old age. Qualitative studies

show that few people in their fifties envisage much in the way of volunteering for their retirement (Mohan, 2016). Similarly, research indicates that what most older workers look forward to in retirement is spending more time with family and on hobbies and interests (Gerteis et al., 2004; Hellevik, 2018).

The boomers' interest in voluntarism will depend on whether the voluntary sector can offer roles that match their interests, values, and preferences. Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) identify apparent changes in motivational bases and patterns of volunteering. As a result of broader societal changes, most notably increased individualism, the authors note a shift from tradition or "collective" forms of volunteering to individualized or "reflexive" forms. Collective volunteering is characterized by long-lasting, intensive, and membership-based commitments to formal, hierarchical, and geographically based organizations (Enjolras & Strømsnes, 2018). Ideology, religion, altruism, and a sense of duty are strong incentives for this group. Conversely, reflexive volunteers are more often motivated by fulfilling personal interests and needs, and their activity is more likely to be irregular and temporary and with looser commitments to organizations. Although self-actualization may be the primary goal of their voluntarism, altruistic motives are still important. To mobilize large numbers of boomers, organizations may therefore need to develop strategies that provide opportunities for flexible and short-term volunteering which combine community service with the pursuit of self-interest and self-actualization.

A further premise for increased voluntarism is that seniors are both encouraged to volunteer and welcomed. How interested are voluntary organizations in older volunteers? Studies of older workers show that negative stereotypes still persist (Ng & Feldman, 2012) and that hiring practices in the labor market are biased toward younger applicants (Gordon & Arvey, 2004). There seem to be very few studies of voluntary organizations' perceptions of elderly volunteers. One is Principi and colleagues' study of organizational opinions of older volunteers based in 74 volunteer organizations in eight European countries (northwestern countries, and Poland and Italy) (Principi, Lindley et al., 2012; Principi & Perek-Bialas, 2014). On the one hand, older volunteers were often considered reliable, available, experienced, and skilled, in particular in organizations with a high share of older volunteers. However, negative perceptions were also emphasized. Common views were that older volunteers have poorer physical and mental health, are less able to change and learn, and need more training and follow-up than younger volunteers. Many organizations also expressed concern about the stability of older volunteers, their observation being that seniors increasingly prefer looser ties to organizations and more short-term volunteering (Schippers & Principi, 2014).

In sum, it seems clear that boomers as a group will have more of the resources needed to participate in voluntary work, while whether they are motivated and allowed to do it is an open question.

### **Previous research**

The rate of volunteering among older adults varies considerably across countries. In Europe, the rate of seniors (age 60–79) who have done voluntary work at least monthly during the last year ranges from 2–3% in southern countries such as Spain and Greece to 20–22% in northern countries such as the Netherlands and the Nordic countries (Erlinghagen & Hank, 2006; Hank & Stuck, 2008; Hansen et al., 2018). With large country variations, popular fields of engagement are culture, education, and health and social services (Eurofound, 2011).

Cross-national differences in participation rates can be traced back to differences in the cultures and institutional frameworks of volunteering across welfare regimes. Specifically, participation is higher in countries where much of volunteering (at all ages) is tied to culture and leisure activities, whereas involvement is less widespread in countries where volunteering mainly focuses on health and social services (e.g., Spain and Italy) (Erlinghagen & Hank, 2006; Eurofound, 2011).

The factors that quite consistently correlate with higher rates of volunteering among older adults (i.e. aged around 50–80) are lower age, higher socioeconomic status (education and income), better physical and mental health, and a larger social network (Dury et al., 2015; Hank & Erlinghagen, 2010; Principi, Chiatti et al., 2012; Tang, 2008; Tang & Morrow-Howell, 2008; Wahrendorf et al., 2016). Older men and women have an equal tendency to volunteer, but in different activities (Dury et al., 2015; Okun & Michel, 2006).

A few studies have examined motives and barriers to senior voluntarism. The principal reasons for volunteering seem to be helping others, contributing to society, socializing, and feeling good and needed (Okun et al., 1998, 2014; Petriwskyj & Warburton, 2007; Stukas et al., 2016). Motives seem to be quite similar across the age groups 50–80, except that learning and career development are more influential among younger volunteers (Okun & Schultz, 2003; Black & Kovacs, 1999). Australian data show that the main barriers to senior volunteering among older adults seem to be a lack of time, family commitments, health problems, and a lack of knowledge about where to go for information on how to get involved (Petriwskyj & Warburton, 2007; Warburton et al., 2007).

### **Present study**

The large available literature on volunteering has some notable gaps and limitations. First, much of the focus has been on older adults and considerably less is known about aspects of the *boomer generation's* volunteering. Particularly given the political rhetoric about harnessing their skills and experiences, knowing more about boomers' motivation and barriers to volunteering can be crucial to understanding the availability of future volunteers and ways in which they can be recruited and retained. For instance, few studies have examined the motives behind or – especially – the barriers to senior voluntarism (Petriwskyj &

Warburton, 2007). Furthermore, virtually no studies have critically examined the potential to mobilize future cohorts of older adults (Dury et al., 2015) or looked into people's willingness to make different forms of commitment to volunteering. Much volunteering requires some degree of sacrifice, stability, and continuity. For organizers and human recipients of volunteer services alike, it is vital that volunteers are willing to make at least some level of commitment.

A further weakness in the literature is the reliance on very crude measures on volunteering. Most measures consist of a single item about having done some form of voluntary work during the past 12 months (Mohan, 2016). Multi-item measures asking about specific areas of volunteering have notable advantages, such as facilitating recall of specific events, giving cues as to what constitutes voluntary work, and providing knowledge about the forms of volunteering that engage older adults (Rooney et al., 2004).

Also, studies that focus on voluntary activity (no/yes) irrespective of the frequency or time devoted to the activity conflate episodic and active forms of involvement. These forms should be studied separately as they represent different types of volunteering with different implications for volunteers, organization, and policymakers. The latter form is arguably more important to strengthen community life and relieve public budgets and social services. It can be argued also that on/off and episodic volunteering may be more or less "involuntary".

This paper explores different aspects of engagement and motivation for voluntary work among Norwegians baby boomers. We first examine current activity levels using a multi-item measure of volunteering: How many in different age groups have done any form of voluntary work during the past year, how many participate more actively, and what form of volunteering do they do? Next we explore motives and barriers for participation and willingness to make various levels of commitment to volunteering.

Finally, we provide a critical analysis of the potential for increased volunteering among non-volunteers and sporadic volunteers. Attitudinal responses about volunteering given in the personal interview are triangulated with responses to questions about barriers (e.g., lack of interest, lack of time) in the anonymous self-administered questionnaire. The latter should minimize social desirability bias and illicit more honest responses regarding receptivity to and motivation for volunteering. We aim to explore the probability of respondents becoming (more) involved in volunteering.

## **Methods**

### ***Data and sample***

Data comes from the third round of the Norwegian study of life-course, aging, and generation (NorLAG) (Slagsvold et al., 2012). NorLAG is a population-based sample drawn from the non-institutionalized population.

Data was collected in 2017 by Statistics Norway via telephone interviews, web-based (postal on request) questionnaire, and register information (e.g., education and marital status). The NorLAG3 gross sample comprises individuals aged 50 to 95 who participated in at least one of the previous two rounds of NorLAG. The telephone interview was completed by 6,099 individuals (68%), of which 4,461 individuals (73%) completed the self-completion part (81% web and 19% postal). We use data from ten 2,993 respondents aged 53–71 who completed both the telephone interview and self-administered questionnaire. Questions about volunteering were only posed in NorLAG3, thus excluding longitudinal analysis.

We here define boomers as those born between 1946 and 1964. They span a large number of years and thus represent a heterogeneous cohort with different life experiences regarding education, work-retirement, grandparenthood, and health. These differences may, in turn, lead to variations regarding ability, interests, and expectations for volunteering. To capture possible differences between early and late boomers, and we distinguish between four age groups: 53–56 ( $n = 604$ ), 57–61 ( $n = 813$ ), 62–66 ( $n = 834$ ), and 67–71 ( $n = 742$ ). These age groups were chosen also to ensure a representative sample for each bracket and to distinguish before and after the traditional retirement age in Norway (age 67).

### **Volunteering measurements**

The following questions were posed in the self-completion part. *Volunteering* is measured by questions about participation (yes/no) in 20 types of voluntary organizations (“Have you during the past 12 months done unpaid work for one or more voluntary organizations within the fields of ...”). The 20 domains can be read in [Figure 2](#). *Time use* is measured by “About how much time, in total, do you spend on voluntary work in a normal week” (no time, less than 1 hour, 1–2 hours, 3–4 hours, 5–6 hours, 7–10 hours, more than 10 hours). *Barriers* are measured by a list introduced with “To what extent do the following contribute to explain why you do not participate (more) in voluntary work” (4-point scale from “To a large extent” to “Not at all”). The list was posed to all respondents and consisted of 10 items (see [Table 3](#)). *Willingness to commit* is measured by agreement to three statements: “In order to do voluntary work I am willing to ... . (i) adjust my holidays and leisure time, (ii) commit to at least six months at a time”, and the statement “I am only willing to contribute in voluntary work if I myself can decide the extent and timing” (5-point scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”, and the response option “will not participate no matter what”) (after reversing the last item, inter-item correlations range from .23 to .55).

Some questions were posed in the interview. First, five items about *motives*. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the following

reasons for volunteering: to meet other people; to contribute with something useful; I find it fun or interesting; I can use my competency; I feel obligated to do it (5-point scale from “very important” to “not at all important”). Finally, a yes/no question posed to non-volunteers: Would you like to start volunteering?

We categorize non-volunteers as “potential volunteers” if they (i) in the interview express willingness to participate, and (ii) do not clearly indicate the opposite in the self-completion part. More specifically, those who have responded (a) that they “will not participate no matter what” in  $\geq$  two of the three commitment questions and/or (b) “not interested” (to a “large” or “some degree”) as a barrier to participation are not categorized as potential volunteers.

### **Analytic strategy**

We analyze descriptive statistics and explore with statistical tests simple means (F-tests) and proportions (chi-square ( $X^2$ )-tests) in different groups. All analyses are weighted for gender, region, and education. The weight was developed by Statistics Norway (Torsteinsen & Holmøy, 2018).

### **Results**

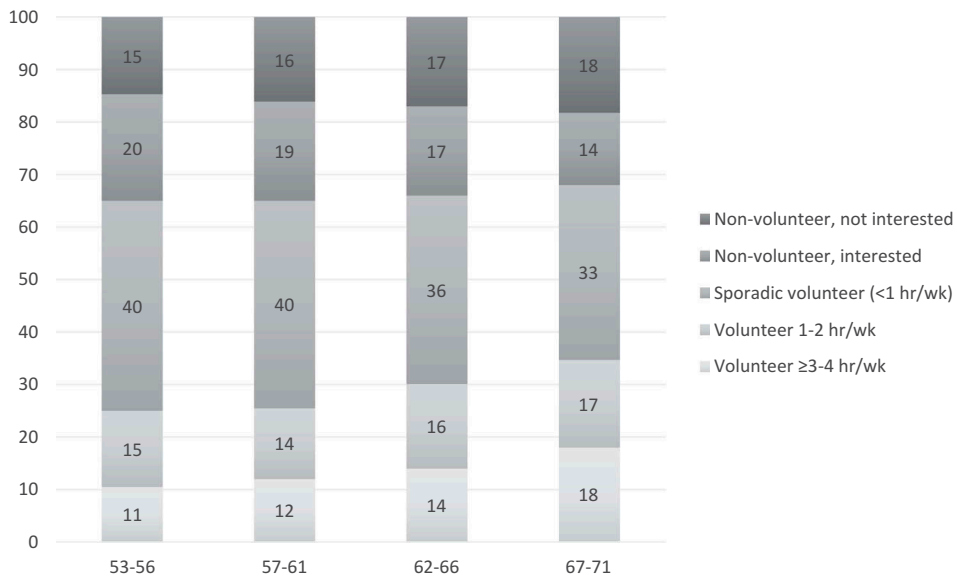
Figure 1 shows the distribution of groups of volunteers and non-volunteers by age group ( $p < .01$ ). Around two out of three (65–68%) across all age groups have done some form of volunteer work in the past year.<sup>1</sup> However, the oldest age group reports a more frequent form of volunteering than the younger groups. The proportion of individuals involved for at least one hour per week is 34% among the 67–71-year-olds, against 27–29% among the younger. Similarly, involvement of more than three hours per week is reported by nearly twice as many of the oldest (18%) than the youngest (11%). Figure 1 also shows proportions of non-volunteers who express (dis)interest in becoming a volunteer. We see that non-volunteers interested and not interested in volunteering emerge as roughly equal-sized groups. In relative terms, the proportion of non-volunteers that indicate interest in volunteering decreases gradually from 58% (age 53–56) to 43% (age 67–71) (not shown).

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of volunteer status groups. Compared with non-volunteers and sporadic volunteers, active volunteers tend to more often be women, older, and partnered. The highest employment rates are found among those who volunteer sporadically or up to two hours per week. Non-volunteers who are not interested in becoming

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<sup>1</sup>NorLAG also contains a single item («Have you done any voluntary work during the past year (yes/no)?»), posed in the interview. Compared with the multi-item measure, the single item yields far lower participation rates: from 40% (age 53–56) to 34% (age 67–71).





N= 2,993,  $\chi^2 = 52.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$

**Figure 1.** Distribution of groups of volunteers and non-volunteers by age (%). N = 2,993,  $\chi^2 = 52.17$ ,  $p < .001$



**Figure 2.** Types of volunteering undertaken in the past 12 months (%). n = 2,993.

a volunteer report somewhat poorer education and health than the other groups. We excluded “having resident children” (no/yes) as it is not significant.

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics by volunteer status. Proportions or means (SD).

	Non-volunteer, not interested	Non-volunteer, interested in becoming a volunteer	Sporadic volunteer (<1 hour/week)	Active volunteer (1–2 hours/week)	Active volunteer (≥3–4 hours/week)	Sign.
Women (%)	54.7	59.6	50.8	40.9	43.1	$\chi^2 = 43.78$ **
Age	62.1 (5.3)	61.3 (5.3)	61.6 (5.3)	62.3 (5.5)	63.2 (5.6)	F = 8.47 **
Married/cohabiting (%)	69.7	71.2	74.9	80.2	75.5	$\chi^2 = 16.77$ **
Education (1–5)	2.8 (1.2)	3.0 (1.2)	3.2 (1.2)	3.1 (1.1)	3.2 (1.2)	F = 13.26 **
Employed (%)	55.9	63.7	69.5	67.7	52.2	$\chi^2 = 57.36$ **
Subjective health (1–5)	3.1 (1.2)	3.3 (1.2)	3.5 (1.1)	3.4 (1.1)	3.3 (1.1)	F = 8.84 **
N	438	528	1173	450	404	

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Figure 2 shows the percentages who report different forms of volunteering. The most common forms are episodic work (26%) and work for community or neighborhood associations (23%), other (20%), sport, exercise (19%), prosocial voluntary organizations (18%), health and care (18%), culture, art, music (17%), and housing cooperatives (15%). Most volunteers (67%) cite two or more activities (not shown).

Table 2 shows the importance of five motivations to volunteer. Important motivations across all age groups include “I can make a positive contribution”, “I find it fun and interesting”, “to meet other people”, and “I can use my competency”. Far fewer, especially in the 60+ age bracket (26%), cite “I feel obligated to do it” as an important reason for their voluntarism. Age differences are significant only for “fun/interesting” and “obligated”. Almost all volunteers (92%) cite three or more reasons (not shown).

Table 3 shows the reasons people give for not doing (more) voluntary work. Because the reasons given should be addressed if the aim is to increase volunteering we name them “barriers” to volunteering, even though some of the reasons may seem more like lack of motivation. The most common reasons (noted by around 40–55%) are “the obligations may soon become

**Table 2.** Motivations to volunteer. Proportions (%) of volunteers who identify reasons as important/very important, by age.

	53–56	57–61	62–66	67–71	$\chi^2$ -test
Make contribution	95.6	95.5	93.1	97.9	3.09
Fun/interesting	86.6	85.7	91.1	92.3	8.90 *
Meet others	80.6	80.5	82.5	83.9	6.13
Use competency	75.0	75.1	80.9	80.0	6.65
Obligated	34.8	35.2	28.7	27.9	9.39 *
N	377	369	388	371	

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table 3.** Barriers to (more) volunteering. Proportions (%) of non-volunteers and sporadic volunteers ( $\leq 1\text{--}2$  hours/week) who identify barriers as somewhat or very important, by age.

	53–56	57–61	62–66	67–71	$\chi^2$ -test
Concerns over future obligations	49.0	49.1	45.0	47.9	3.09
Not asked	46.9	46.9	44.0	41.9	6.14
Lack of time	54.1	54.1	47.1	38.4	35.90 **
Not interested	41.7	41.7	39.4	36.5	7.19
Health problems	21.9	21.9	27.3	34.4	10.19 **
Life situation demands	46.9	46.9	41.0	33.4	58.03 **
Already involved (volunteers only)	27.1	27.1	26.2	29.7	6.37
Little interest for my age group	8.2	8.2	17.0	26.7	59.61 **
Little interest in my competency	14.8	14.8	17.2	21.9	22.87 **
Lack information	16.1	16.1	24.6	20.4	13.30 **
N	425	537	527	429	

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

too much”, “not been asked”, “lack of time”, and “not interested”. Other common barriers (noted by around 15–25%) are “own health problems”, “my life situation is too demanding”, “I already do a lot” (among those who volunteer up to 1–2 hours per week), “There is little interest for my competency”, “There is little interest for people of my age in the organizations that interest me”, and “I don’t know where to start”. Age differences are significant for all barriers ( $p < .05$ ), except for “obligations”, “not asked”, “not interested”, and “already involved”. Especially health problems are more influential among the oldest. Similarly, the oldest more often express a perceived lack of interest in voluntary organizations for their competency and/or age group. Lack of time and life situation barriers are more often cited by the younger.

Table 4 shows how many are willing to make commitments to voluntarism. Only about 15% are willing to adjust holidays and leisure time to do voluntary work. Similarly, few (16–23%) are willing to commit or tie themselves to six months at a time. About half are willing to participate only if they can decide the extent and timing of their involvement themselves. Age differences are significant ( $p < .05$ ) for the two latter items, but not for the item about holidays and leisure time. We find some differences depending on volunteer status. More volunteers (22%) than non-volunteers (8%) are willing to adjust holidays and leisure time (not shown). Similarly, about 10% of non-volunteers are willing to commit to six months, far fewer than among volunteers aged 53–61 (38%) and 62–71 (25%).

The analyses presented in Table 5 take a closer look at the potential for increased voluntarism. We explore how many volunteers and “potential volunteers” (non-volunteers who in the interview express some interest in voluntarism) seem unlikely to devote (more) time to volunteering based on their reports in the self-administered questionnaire. We mainly rely on answers regarding barriers (see Table 3), and have distinguished three

**Table 4.** Willingness to make commitments. Proportions (%) who agree or completely agree, by age.

	53–56	57–61	62–66	67–71	$\chi^2$ -test
Willing to adjust holidays and leisure time	14.4	14.4	15.0	16.8	3.06
Willing to commit to 6 months at a time	22.7	22.7	19.2	16.1	8.84 *
Only willing if I can decide extent and timing	49.5	49.5	50.7	54.4	7.91 *
N	517	656	684	589	

\*  $p < 0.05$

categories regarding whether they are *able* (life situation and health barriers), *willing* to participate (more) (motivational barriers), and *allowed* (opportunity- and information barriers). First, turning to the non-volunteers. Of the non-volunteers who express an interest in volunteering (51% of all non-volunteers), a substantial number indicate clear life situation and health, motivational, or opportunity and information barriers. Of the barriers, the motivational barriers are likely the most important predictor of actual behavior. We have thus looked more closely at the constituent items. As can be seen, about 15% of “potential volunteers” reply “will not participate no matter what” (in at least two of the three commitment items) and 40% express a lack of interest.

Turning to the volunteers, we see that among both “sporadic volunteers” (less than one hour per week) and “active volunteers” (one hour or more per

**Table 5.** Barriers to volunteering among volunteers and potential volunteers (%).

	Non-volunteer, interested in becoming a volunteer	Sporadic volunteer ( $<1$ hour/week)	Active volunteer ( $\geq 1$ –2 hours/ week)	$\chi^2$ -test
Life situation and health barriers <sup>a</sup>	41.1	46.2	48.9	9.20 *
Opportunity- and information barriers <sup>b</sup>	27.2	26.1	23.9	9.88 **
Motivational barriers <sup>c</sup>	43.2	54.1	56.0	10.21 **
Not interested	41.8	37.7	29.6	13.94 **
Will not participate no matter what	14.2	13.3	12.0	1.56
Already making a contribution (volunteers only)		19.3	41.0	92.52 **
Motivational and/or ability/ opportunity barriers ( <sup>c</sup> and/or <sup>(a+b)</sup> )	55.3	61.1	62.8	12.92 **
N	528	1173	854	

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

<sup>a</sup>Report two or more of the following barriers: demanding life situation, health problems, concerns over future commitments, lack of time.

<sup>b</sup>Report two or more of the following barriers: not asked, don’t know where to start, little interest for my age group, little interest for my competency.

<sup>c</sup>Report (i) “not interested” as barrier, (ii) “will not participate no matter what” on two or more questions about commitment, or (iii) “already contributing” as a barrier.

week), 40–55% cite health and life situation- or motivational barriers, and 20–30% cite opportunity- and information barriers, as reasons for not doing more voluntary work. Overall, as indicated by the second to last row of the table, a clear majority of non-volunteers (55%) and volunteers (61–63%) give clear indications that they are not motivated and/or not able to devote (more) time to voluntary work.

## Discussion

Against the backdrop of population aging it has become a key policy aim in Western societies to harness the skills and resources of aging baby boomers to the benefit of local communities and society as a whole. However, few studies have critically examined the boomers' potential and motivation for volunteering. How interested are aging boomers in volunteering? How can their use and potential be maximized?

The annual rate of volunteering is high: almost seven out of 10 Norwegian baby boomers have done some form of voluntary work during the past year. About half of these individuals volunteers for one hour or more during a normal week. The most common forms of volunteering are sporadic volunteering (e.g., fundraising or festival work) and contributions in local community organizations, sport and culture organizations, prosocial voluntary organizations, and health and care services. The main reasons for volunteering are to help others, to meet others, to use skills, and to be stimulated and feel good. Hence, in line with the theory of reflexive volunteering and pluralization of motives (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003), individuals act from a combination of motives that center on both self-interest and altruism. The main barriers to volunteering include a perceived lack of time, concern over future commitments, life situation challenges, and, above all, health-related limitations. In addition, about a third cite lack of interest, not having been asked, and – especially among the oldest – a perceived lack of interest in their competency and/or age group.

Can we realistically expect boomers to become more involved? Even if boomers are currently quite active, there seems to be some untapped potential. Time use studies reveal that seniors tend to allocate a great deal of their time to passive activities. On a typical day, Norwegians between ages 67 and 74 on average spend 10 minutes on volunteering, far less than the three hours spent watching TV (Vaage, 2012). For a group that is largely retired the time commitment to volunteering is thus quite small. The sheer size of the boomer generation means that even small increases in volunteering can have major societal impacts.

Increased voluntarism can be realized by recruiting more volunteers and/or by encouraging volunteers to become more active. With respect to the former, findings reveal that just over half of non-volunteers express interest

in becoming a volunteer. However, this attitude should be interpreted with caution for at least two reasons. First, it is well established that attitudes tend to have quite a moderate effect on behavior (Ajzen, 1988; Sheeran & Webb, 2016). Second, because of social desirability bias in personal interviews, positive attitudes are likely overestimated. This notion is supported by the fact that a majority (55%) of those who express a positive attitude to volunteering in the interview, in the self-completion part indicate clear motivational and other barriers that may impede their ability and willingness to volunteer. Positive attitudes toward volunteering expressed in a personal interview – though perhaps real at the time – may thus give far too positive an indication of the potential for recruiting baby boomers for voluntary service.

Similar doubt can be cast on the likelihood that sporadic volunteers will become more involved. While a previous Norwegian study found that two-thirds of volunteers above age 55 express interest in increasing their involvement (Folkestad & Langhelle, 2016), this interest seems lower in our sample. Although we did not probe this inclination directly, as many as 61–63% of volunteers cite important barriers to expanded commitment, such as lack of interest, the fact that they already are making a contribution (in other words, that they already do enough), and life situation and health barriers. Thus, many clearly indicate that they are not able or willing to increase their volunteer effort.

A further challenge for voluntary organizations is that few seem interested in making major commitments to volunteering. This finding supports theory about a recent shift from habitual and dedicated involvement toward more episodic volunteering coupled with weaker organizational attachments (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). More specifically, we find that very few are willing to commit to six months at a time, or to adjust holidays and leisure time to volunteer. About half are willing only if they can decide the extent and timing of their involvement. The willingness to make commitments is somewhat higher among volunteers than non-volunteers. Policy might therefore seek to raise the levels of engagement among those already engaged, especially the sporadic volunteers, rather than drawing in new groups who are not currently engaged.

### **Implications**

Findings have several implications for initiatives to recruit and retain older volunteers. Although we have argued for “tempered expectations”, findings do suggest that a substantial number of boomers could be mobilized given the opportunity and the right incentives. First, it is critical for organizations to try to match as many of the boomers’ motivations as possible in the roles on offer. Hence, nonprofit organizations should clearly emphasize the facets

of the volunteering that offer enjoyment, meaning, and challenge. A novel finding is that most volunteers attach importance to being able to use their competency. This finding dovetails with cultural notions about the boomers as a generation particularly geared toward using their personal and professional skills in retirement (Phillipson et al., 2008). The voluntary sector may thus find that aging boomers do not settle for simple voluntary tasks but ask for more challenging and varied commitments (Schipper & Principi, 2014).

A second critical aim is to reduce the reported barriers to volunteering. Motivational, informational, and opportunity barriers seem more amenable to change than life situation and health barriers. Important modifiable barriers include not being asked, not having received information, and not feeling appreciated or valued. As these factors are cited as *reasons* for not participating and not as mere experiences, one may assume that some individuals may take up volunteering *had* they been asked, received information, and felt needed and appreciated.

The finding that almost 30% of the 67–71 year-olds report that they are regarded as less interesting for nonprofit organizations suggests ageist assumptions on the part of nonprofit organizations. We are unable to indicate whether these perceptions actually reflect age discrimination or merely the respondents' low confidence or negative self-beliefs or stereotypes about their own age group. In support of the former, interviews with representatives from voluntary organizations show that negative perceptions of older volunteers are indeed quite widespread (Principi & Perek-Bialas, 2014). There is clearly a need for more research about attitudes and possible discriminatory practices toward older volunteers in nonprofit organizations.

Third, findings emphasize sensitivity to boomers' preference for flexibility in working times and responsibilities. Nonprofit organizations thus should aim to provide a multiplicity of volunteer options that allow people to engage in different ways at different times and at different levels of commitment, ranging from short-term and project-based (e.g., cleaning a park or organizing a fair) volunteer opportunities to more long-term commitments.

These suggestions seem straightforward but may in practice pose serious challenges for nonprofit organizations. For one thing, mobilizing and utilizing boomers who value choice, flexibility, and autonomy may require much administrative time and effort (Chambre & Netting, 2018). It requires careful thought and planning, finding volunteer options for boomers who want meaningful, challenging work but are unwilling to make major commitments. Furthermore, much volunteering, especially work that involves service to people, requires some level of stability and commitment. This especially holds for health and social services, a key area for policy focus on increased volunteering. A Norwegian white paper recently indicated that as much as 25% of elder care might be covered by the voluntary sector in the future (NOU, 2011). For this area especially, the shift toward more self-directed

forms of volunteering may increase the gap between the priorities of the volunteer and the needs of organizations and the recipients of their services.

### **Limitations**

The most important limitation of this study concerns sample selection biases. The study sample, because it had participated in NorLAG at least once before, is likely biased toward people with good health, high socioeconomic status, and certain personality traits (e.g., conscientiousness). While some of this bias is adjusted for by applying statistical weights, it can nonetheless be assumed that findings overestimate volunteering activity and motivation in the population. That said, our findings are very similar to those found in previous Norwegian studies using ordinary cross-sectional samples (Fladmoe et al., 2018).

Another limitation is that we largely ignore *informal* volunteering – that is, volunteering carried out outside of an organizational context. Informal volunteering such as elder care to family and informal community help are widespread and important supplements to formal services.

Yet another potential limitation is that the analyses are based on Norwegian data. Levels of volunteering are higher in the Nordic countries than in most other countries, partly due to strong cultural and institutional support for the activity (Hansen et al., 2018). In countries with weaker traditions for volunteering, motivational and opportunity-related barriers to volunteering may be stronger. More important is the question of whether Norwegian boomers are representative for this generation in other countries. As Norway is characterized by a high educational level and more individualistic values than in most other countries, Norwegian boomers may be at the leading edge of more individualistic (reflexive) forms of volunteering.

### **Conclusion**

Can a surge in senior volunteering be expected in the coming years? Optimistic commentators highlight the potential boost to volunteering from demographic change, improvements in seniors' ability to volunteer, and, above all, high current levels of engagement and motivation. For example, it has been anticipated that, by actively appealing to the motivations of older volunteers, the older volunteer force could double in the US (Johnson et al., 2004). We corroborate the empirical basis for prior optimism by showing that a substantial proportion of boomers are already active and motivated. Two-thirds have participated during the past year and almost every other non-volunteer indicates a willingness to start volunteering.

However, by going a few steps further and critically examine other aspects of the boomers' engagement and mentality toward volunteering, we find



there are limits to what can realistically be expected. First, most volunteers are not regular or active volunteers: less than half of volunteers participate on a weekly basis. Hence, volunteers typically make infrequent, sporadic, or one-off contributions. Second, findings throw doubt on whether boomers will act on their positive attitudes toward voluntarism. More than half of the non-volunteers give answers in the anonymous self-completion part that indicate that they are not able or willing to start volunteering. A third challenge for voluntary organizations is that few boomers are willing to make a major commitment to volunteering.

A shift toward more reflexive forms of volunteering represents a challenge for volunteer organizations and policy aims of increased volunteerism among older adults. Findings suggest that the boomer cohort has the potential and inclination to participate in larger numbers but that their motivation rests on whether nonprofit organizations can accommodate to individualistic (reflexive) styles of volunteering: flexible and time-limited scheduling; casual attachment; and activities that address self-serving and altruistic motivations.

In practice, however, providing a broad range of options to match the various interests, skills, and preferences of boomers can pose severe challenges for the nonprofit sector, especially for organizations with limited financial and staff resources. Flexible, “casual”, and “project-based” volunteering can also conflict with organizations and users of their services that require some level of predictability and continuity and rely on more highly trained and committed volunteers. A key challenge for the voluntary sector will thus be to balance seniors’ preference for flexible and meaningful engagement with the tasks organizations can offer and service recipients’ need for stability and continuity.

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