

# Challenges and Psychosocial Growth for Older Volunteers Giving Intensive Humanitarian Service

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Received August 6, 2010; Accepted January 28, 2011  
Decision Editor: Nancy Schoenberg, PhD

**Purpose of the study:** We conducted a qualitative study of 38 mid-late life volunteers in intensive humanitarian service to ascertain the challenges, personal changes, and benefits they experienced from their volunteer activities. Intensive volunteering was defined as service done on a 24-hr a day basis at a location away from home. **Design and Methods:** In-depth interviews were conducted by phone or in person with each participant. Couples serving together were interviewed conjointly. Data were analyzed using McCracken's 5-step process for long interviews. **Results:** Participants described and resolved many challenges including adjustment to new situations and cultures, work-related challenges, and readjustment to home. Consistent with Erikson's descriptions of care, volunteers described benefits of expanded social networks, increased closeness to spouses, and increased compassion and empathy for others. In terms of wisdom, they described altered personal perspectives, with lessened materialism and self-focus, greater appreciation of cultural differences, and finding existential meaning in service. **Implications:** Because of population aging and social service organizational contraction, humanitarian service organizations may rely more on older volunteers to fulfill their goals. A deeper understanding of the challenges, ways in which they were met, and perceived benefits of later life intensive volunteering can inform organizational efforts to recruit older adults and support them in diverse settings.

**Key Words:** Volunteerism and civic engagement, Productive aging, Qualitative research Methods, Religion and spirituality

Volunteering has become increasingly important with the simultaneous occurrence of several trends. First, the recent recession has reduced funding for service organizations, whereas the need for human services has grown (Abbruzzese, 2009; Stewart, 2010). Second, the large baby boom's impending retirement offers a largely untapped force of skilled individuals to volunteer. Third, many adults live active lifestyles well into old age (Manton, Gu, & Lamb, 2006), and there is a growing desire among many of them to contribute to others' welfare (Hawley & Bello, 2010; Magee, 2004). Thus, a growing need for volunteer help with human services coupled with increased availability of healthy older adults suggests their potential contributions to volunteer work.

## Senior Volunteerism

Aging adults' sense of social responsibility increasingly has been channeled into volunteer service, and today, more than 60% of adults ages 55 years and older are volunteering in some form. Many older individuals participate in both employment and volunteering, with volunteer activity increasing after retirement (Zedlewski & Schaner, 2005). For example, Rossi (2005) found that

adults in their 40s and 50s, especially those of higher socioeconomic status, increased their participation in civic work and formal volunteering over time, maintaining high participation levels well into old age. Likewise, a recent study of volunteerism, which examined participants in ecotourism projects, found that 23% of their participants were older than 50 years of age (Cheung, Michel, & Miller, 2010).

Studies of older adult volunteers demonstrate that they reap benefits to their physical health (Hinterlong, Morrow-Howell, & Rozario, 2007), mental health (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003; Musick & Wilson, 2003), and well-being, including more positive affect and a stronger sense of purpose in life (Greenfield & Marks, 2004). Qualitative or mixed-method studies of senior volunteers for nonprofit organizations found motivations of contributing to others and learning (Narushima, 2005), rewards of role satisfaction and better comprehension of the medical system (Dulka, Yaffe, Goldin, & Rowe, 1999), increased satisfaction with life, and improved abilities to cope with personal trauma (Newman, Vasudev, & Onawola, 1985). A sense of purpose in life is especially strong in those who give service in religious organizations (Stockton-Chilson, 2004).

### Religious-Sponsored Volunteerism

Religious groups are one of the primary avenues through which people give service. There are over 129,000 congregations in the United States with long traditions of social service, with 91% reporting that their members volunteer their services either year round or seasonally (Spring & Grimm, 2004). Religious organizations attract the largest number of volunteers, with 35% of Americans volunteering for them. Religious organizations are also a source of older American's service, incorporating 46.7% of all volunteers aged 65 years and older (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Furthermore, persons who volunteer for religious organizations have exhibited greater attachment to volunteer activities and are more likely to continue volunteering than those who serve other types of organizations (J. Wilson & Musick, 1999). To date, studies of volunteering among religious organizations have focused on volunteer's motives (Becker & Dhingra, 2001), types of service (Becker & Dhingra, 2001; Hoge, Zech, McNamara, & Donahue, 1998), rates of volunteering (J. Wilson & Janoski,

1995), or predictors of volunteerism (Hoge et al., 1998). No studies of religious-sponsored volunteerism have examined either intensive service or service performed exclusively by older adults.

We designed this study to investigate intensive volunteering among adults aged more than 50 years, those in middle or later life. Intensive volunteering is defined as service done on a 24-hr a day basis at a location away from home. Past studies of intensive volunteering indicate positive results for those who give it. For example, former Peace Corps volunteers reported benefits of overseas service, including increased confidence and coping abilities, improved understanding of varied world views, more empathy for those in other countries, and personal growth (Cross, 1998; A. H. Wilson, 1986).

In our research, we worked with religious organizations sponsoring intensive volunteering to discover institutional attributes that facilitated senior volunteers' abilities. We also examined the challenges faced and psychosocial benefits these volunteers attained when they left home to serve, which is the focus of this article.

### Study Rationale

Studies show that there are well-documented benefits of senior volunteerism, religious-based volunteerism, and intensive volunteerism. However, no one has conducted research at the intersection of these three types of volunteerism (i.e., senior, religious-based, intensive volunteerism). Little is known about older persons who volunteer intensely for relatively long periods away from home.

Also scarce are volunteers' own accounts of the challenges and benefits of this type of service. To date, benefits of senior volunteering have been identified primarily in relation to one's physical or mental health through use of quantitative methods (Hinterlong et al., 2007; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Morrow-Howell et al., 2003; Musick & Wilson, 2003). Few researchers have sought volunteer's own accounts of the ways in which they view service as challenging or beneficial to them (Brown et al., 2011; Dulka et al., 1999; Narushima, 2005; Newman et al., 1985).

With increased risk of disasters worldwide (United Nations, 2009), there will be a need to recruit more persons for humanitarian service. The large cohort of adults with high levels of education, skills, and professional experience nearing or newly

retired represent assets these organizations can tap to address humanitarian needs (National Council on Aging, Respectability Initiative Report, 2010). To succeed in recruiting and retaining older volunteers for intensive service, it is crucial to understand the challenges they face, how they respond to challenges, and how they benefit from intensive service.

### Theoretical Perspective

We used an inductive approach to data collection and analysis for this study, grounding our findings in the data. However, because no research is devoid of theory, our study's orienting framework was Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. E. H. Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick (1986) posited that continued development of self and attainment of wisdom in later life formed the basis for a resilient self. E. Erikson (1963) described the last two psychosocial stages of development as generativity versus stagnation and ego integrity versus despair. Generativity implies an outward-looking care for one's family, for others, and for generations yet to come (Erikson et al. 1986), with those who successfully balance the opposites of generativity and stagnation obtaining the virtue of care. These persons experience interpersonal connectedness, enjoying mutual relationships and participating in generative activities with those for whom they truly care (E. H. Erikson, & Erikson 1997). The stage of ego integrity versus despair is one in which persons strive to make meaning of their lives, developing feelings that their lives fit together in meaningful ways (E. H. Erikson, & Erikson 1997; Hall, 2007). In this process, a new understanding is gained of past virtues and from them a new one is formed, that of wisdom.

E. Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development guided our interpretation of findings. With its developmental perspective on potential psychosocial changes and processes in later life, Erikson's theory facilitated our understanding of the psychosocial development of the volunteers as they gave service, whereas studying their service gave us an opportunity to understand different ways that generativity and ego integrity can be carried out and thus offer new and expanded understanding of these two stages.

### Research Questions

This study specifically examined challenges, change, and benefits in a sample of adults aged

more than 50 years who gave intensive humanitarian service. Our research questions were (a) What challenges did older adults in intense volunteer service describe and how were these challenges met? and (b) How did participants change and what did they gain as a result of their volunteer activities?

### Methods

We conducted semistructured interviews with 38 Americans (19 males and 19 females) aged more than 50 years who served a minimum of two weeks away from home, giving service to others. Inclusion criteria were (a) people aged more than 50 years, (b) who left home to serve, and (c) who had been home less than two years. These criteria yielded a sample who served in varied circumstances, with the majority serving overseas for more than a year.

We chose to study religious-based volunteering because large numbers of people, particularly older adults, serve through religious organizations (Spring & Grimm, 2004; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Also, religious-based volunteers are more likely to continue volunteering than those who serve in other types of organizations and to volunteer multiple times (J. Wilson & Musick, 1999). We believed that religious organizations would provide ample opportunity to observe persons engaged in both sustained and intensive volunteering and therefore would enhance our ability to examine psychosocial development over time.

### Sample

The types of intensive service studied included disaster relief, which requires a quick response and lasts only a few weeks for individual volunteers, and humanitarian work that met long-term needs with prolonged interventions. Both types of service were intensive either because of the hard physical work in the disaster setting or because of the long-term commitment to work in unfamiliar surroundings.

Three organizations provided access to individual and couple volunteers. They were The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter LDS Church, with its volunteers called "Mormons"), Mennonite Central Committee (hereafter MCC, with its volunteers called "Mennonites"), and Lutheran Disaster Response (hereafter LDR; their volunteers are called "Lutherans").

**Table 1. Mean Age, Income, Length of Service, and Previous Episodes of Volunteering**

Demographic characteristic	Mean	SD
Respondent age		
LDS Church	65.63	2.872
MCC	64.93	5.625
LDR	65.00	11.986
All respondents	65.24	6.223
Monthly income		
LDS Church	\$5,327.75	\$2,964.328
MCC	\$3,981.58	\$1,992.580
LDR	\$6,114.29	\$2,803.229
All respondents	\$5,023.51	\$2,686.941
Length of Service (in weeks)		
LDS Church	86.25	14.884
MCC	106.87	79.758
LDR	8.17	6.274
All respondents	81.95	61.204
Number of previous periods of service		
LDS Church	2.1875	2.80995
MCC	1.6000	.91026
LDR	1.1429	.37796
All respondents	1.7632	1.92332

Note: LDR = Lutheran Disaster Response; MCC = Mennonite Central Committee.

The LDS Church has provided, since 1985, nearly 6,500 humanitarian volunteers serving from 6 months to 2 years in 167 countries (LDS Church, n.d.). These volunteers distribute wheelchairs, train professionals in neonatal resuscitation and eyesight-enhancing procedures, and work with local entities to provide access to clean water).

The Mennonite Church and other Anabaptist churches sponsor the MCC, which coordinates Mennonites and others with similar values in providing services in over 50 countries, including community development, peace building, disaster relief, and sustainable communities (MCC, n.d.). Currently, there are 735 Mennonite volunteers throughout the world, serving between three months and five years at a time.

LDR is a collaborative ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. LDR responds to disasters of all types and sizes in the United States, including helping with disaster preparation, providing spiritual/emotional care, and cleanup/rebuilding assistance in the wake of natural disasters (LDR, 2009).

These organizations were contacted and asked to refer former volunteers who met the above criteria and who would be willing to be interviewed

regarding their service. The LDS Church gave the names and contact information of eight couples, MCC referred five couples and five singles, and LDR referred three couples and two singles. All were interviewed except for one Lutheran volunteer who declined citing time constraints. These organizations were chosen because they use a significant number of senior volunteers and gave a good contrast in the type of services they provide—medium-length administrative and welfare service (1–2 years, LDS Church), medium to very long administrative, teaching, and disaster response service (1–5 years, MCC), and very short to short disaster response service (2 weeks to 6 months, LDR). With the LDS Church and MCC, we also obtained an orientation session to better acquaint us with the work of the organizations, their criteria for senior volunteers, and the views these organizations’ administrators held of the rewards and challenges of utilizing senior volunteers.

The volunteers had an average age of 65.24 years ( $SD = 6.22$ ), with a range of 52–88 years. The wide age range was appropriate to the different types of volunteering studied in our research and was similar to prior qualitative studies of senior volunteers (Narushima, 2005; Newman et al., 1985).

The respondents’ monthly household income ranged from \$455 to \$12,000 ( $M = \$5,023$ ,  $SD = \$2,687$ ; see Table 1). Regarding marital status, two were single (5.3%), 33 married (86.8%), one widowed (2.6%), and two divorced (5.3%). The volunteers served an average of 81.95 weeks ( $SD = 61.2$ ) or just over 18 months. The range was wide from as little as two weeks to as much as six years. All but two of the Mormon and Mennonite volunteers served in countries that were different from their home country. Also, all but three individuals had served more than once, with range of from one to nine periods of formal service ( $M = 1.76$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ ). In addition, all the volunteers reported years of less-intensive organizational service, including volunteering in various capacities in their churches and communities (i.e., Boy Scout leader, hospice volunteer, etc.).

Even though 33 participants were married, not all of them served as couples. Three people who were married served singly in disaster relief. Volunteers provided assistance that ranged from disaster responses after the tsunami in the Philippines and Hurricane Katrina to giving dental care, carrying out peace building and employment

training, building houses, coordinating medical supplies, and teaching English.

### Procedures

Respondents were interviewed either in their homes or over the phone by the first or second author. One couple was interviewed in a classroom on the campus at the second author's university. The interviews lasted from 30 to 90 min, with an average length of 75 min. Interview questions focused on challenges volunteers experienced and benefits they received. Sample interview questions included: "What did you think volunteering would be like before you went? Did it turn out to be the way you thought it would be?" "What did you gain from this experience? To what extent, if any, do you see yourself differently as a result of your volunteer experiences?" At the conclusion of the interviews, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire. The study was approved by the institutional review boards of Utah State and Penn State Universities.

Analysis began with the researchers discussing volunteer responses in the first five interviews. As a result of this analysis, several interview questions were added for the remaining participants, and probes were added to other questions to obtain more contextual data. The interviews were transcribed and coded, using the five-stage process described by McCracken (1988) for analysis of long interviews. The first stage involved reading the material for general understanding and identification of concepts related to volunteer service, whereas the second involved forming preliminary categories (called codes). The third stage involved identifying patterns and connections among the codes, thereby developing themes. The fourth stage consisted of refining the connections by comparing individual experiences, with the last stage being the synthesis of data from the preliminary themes, patterns, and relationships among codes to determine the final themes. The first through third stages of this process are very similar to Corbin and Strauss's (2008) process of open and axial coding, and both methods of analysis rely on memos to develop categories and themes. We made liberal use of memos during the analytic process. Throughout the analysis, all coding was reviewed by the first and second authors to confirm the accuracy of the categorization process and the sensitivity of the coding to the transcript information. Differences

were discussed and resolved. Data were coded and analyzed using QSR\*NVIVO 8.

### Results

The presentation of our results focuses on cognitive, social, and emotional challenges and how participants addressed them, thus providing insight into participants' service-related growth and development. We describe challenges and how they were met first, followed by an examination of the perceived benefits and how they related to the respondents' psychosocial development.

#### Challenges and Coping Strategies

*Self Doubt.*—Although many respondents looked forward to serving, some experienced feelings of self-doubt and fear. Volunteers with all three organizations expressed concerns about their abilities to succeed in the circumstances they faced. One Mormon couple who served in Africa described it as, "fear of a place, the fear of the unknown . . . can I do what they're asking me to do?"

A Lutheran volunteer with self-doubts described his team leader's efforts to recruit him by building his confidence that he was qualified to oversee building of a tent city for volunteers serving victims of Hurricane Katrina. He said:

He hammered me for about, I'd say two weeks, before, I said, okay, okay, I'll go . . . I just wasn't sure of my capabilities . . . . And then, by him asking me different questions on the camp, you know, and I'd bring up things that he would say, "well what do I need?" and I would tell him. What he was doing, was he was feeding me lines until he got me ashore.

Participants offered several solutions to the challenge of self-doubt. One spoke of taking "a step of faith and jump[ing] in." A disaster relief volunteer stated, "[You] draw strength from God and your team members." Another recommended a stalwart focus on "doing; being there for others in need" as a way to subdue fear and doubt. All participants stated that once they got into volunteering, this self-doubt subsided.

*Adjusting to New Locations.*—Despite training from their sponsoring organizations, participants found that adjusting to their service locations could be difficult, and support from others was essential. Volunteers learned from others how to navigate

their new lives—where to find doctors, buy groceries, and how to use local transportation. One Mormon couple with a career military husband noted, “You have to be a survivor. So, you have to figure out how am I going to get from point A to point B?” They relied on their military experience to “figure everything out . . . Then we shared those with all the other couples as they would come in.”

*Cultural Adjustment in Other Countries.*—Coping with the vast differences in lifestyles between North America and the country of service was mentioned by several participants. One Mormon woman who served in Asia said, “It’s just hard to prepare you for what you’re actually going to see.” The differences in pace of life, getting things done, and reliability of transportation were challenging to many volunteers, along with living in indigenous conditions that could be considered spartan by U.S. standards. Another Mormon couple found that their apartment needed an upgrade in order for them to be able to live in it. They pondered different alternatives and with the landlord’s approval decided to use some of their savings to purchase appliances, paint, and put in new curtains. Because they would be living in that apartment for two years, they saw it as a worthwhile investment. Another couple, serving in a disaster area, described learning to adjust to high temperatures with no air conditioning, along with the lack of privacy that came with having many people living with them.

Most volunteers identified patience and flexibility as qualities that got them through the rough patches. One Mormon volunteer who served in Africa noted, “Their lifestyle is so different and on such a basic level that you had to go with the flow, so to speak.” Another couple noted that they made many mistakes at first but felt they learned from them, stating, “And once you know those taboo things, don’t do them, you’re OK,” while a man who served in Latin America said:

You got to learn to adapt overseas. You’ve got to learn patience because things are not efficient overseas at all. It’s just things take extra time and you get; you could get frustrated if you’re not alert to this . . . it goes with the territory and don’t let it get you down. Just press on.

*Work-Related Challenges.*—Challenges in the work itself came in many different forms. For some volunteers they were cultural, for others financial. Difficulties also came in the form of

unmet expectations and discouragement or fatigue. Several Mennonite volunteers felt challenged when collaborating in teams with persons from other cultures. One woman described it as:

You have to learn all the different new people that you have to work with . . . you think, oh, I’m going out here as a volunteer so things will just be honky dory, right. And you realize pretty soon, that’s pretty naïve.

The lack of necessary finances to complete work also was a challenge. In one disaster situation, volunteers did not receive money from pledged sources in a timely manner. One Lutheran volunteer responded by meeting with women from a neighboring state who went to their church, raised money, and gave him \$1000 in gift cards that could be used for building supplies.

A third area of challenge was that volunteers often did not find themselves in the situations they had anticipated. One Lutheran went to a disaster area and noted, “I went down as a minister for Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and as a clinical therapist, thinking that I would be working with posttraumatic stress types of reactions and actually ended up being a carpenter.” Some Mennonite volunteers also arrived overseas expecting to do one kind of work, only to be assigned another.

The responses to these challenges included having a flexible attitude, leaving personal agendas at home, and trusting in God that things will work. One Lutheran said, “You never know what you are going to be called or asked to do, and you’ve got to be flexible.” Volunteers often reframed their experiences in terms of personal growth, calling them “stretching” and “enjoyable.” One woman said: “I think all the negatives; discomfort sometimes with the work, procedures and so forth . . . I wouldn’t necessarily say these are negative. They were just the situation. We basically went prepared to rough it, whatever it took.”

Volunteers also needed emotional support, and they helped each other by talking with and listening to each other. One disaster relief volunteer said:

Some people just wanted you to walk with them—even though they needed to have their houses mucked out—not to counsel with them, just to be there . . . [The volunteers] were working on a house that was particularly hard hit—this 3-4 year old child would just sit. One of the women . . . brought the child a stuffed animal. [The child] opened to the woman immediately. One of the men

took a rope and made her a swing . . . . Those are the stories that were told after dinner [among the volunteers], and there were very few dry eyes. My point is that you have to maintain your emotional bank account by sharing stories.

*Cultural Adjustment When Coming Home.*—After the volunteers had adjusted to their new locations, they often needed to mentally readjust after arriving home. Six couples and two single volunteers identified difficult aspects of re-entry to their homes in North America. The challenges and coping strategies were different for each person or couple. One Mormon woman described their return as feeling like, “you’ve been pushed off the back of a pickup, going down the freeway at 55 mph. We worked (in service) until 8 o’clock at night. Then you come home and say, What am I doing with my life now?” She favored another mission if possible, noting how their age limited their callings in their home church. “We’re old; we’re has-beens to them, what do we do with our lives? You have been productive. You have been serving. It gets under your skin. Then you come home and feel like you’re not doing any good.”

An additional re-entry challenge was reconnecting with friends and family. One Mennonite couple described it as,

When you come home a lot of people look at you as you’re a hero or something . . . but they don’t really want to know about it. They just look at you like some kind of freak that you’d want to go to third worlds.

One Mennonite couple used an effective strategy to deal with re-entry, traveling home from Asia by ship. The husband described it as, “a chance to debrief, to unwind over a month’s time. And so that makes the coming home a softer landing.” Others stayed in contact with friends and family during their service, which made the return transition easier.

Volunteers were able, in some cases for the first time, to see their home countries and cultures through the eyes of others, and some wanted to share what they had learned with persons at home. One Mennonite volunteer said, “So now I feel like that’s part of my mission; to educate people a little more gently, about how the rest of the world sees us.”

### *Growth and Benefits*

*Increased Connection With Other Volunteers.*—In drawing upon each others’ strengths, volunteers

became close to one another. Volunteers from all three agencies expanded their friendships and social contacts during their service. One person said, “That is one of the things that makes [service] so rewarding . . . the friendships, just hooking up with them, sharing stories, working together for a couple of hours a day.” Another said, “You just have this close association with them, and we still get E-mail from some of them.”

*Increased Connection With Spouses.*—Many volunteers found that serving together also increased their closeness to their spouses. Half of the Mormon couples felt that working as a team while serving had improved their marital relationships and that spending so much time together under challenging circumstances resulted in new appreciation of their spouses. The wife in one Mormon couple said, “So you learn patience with one another. And I think you grow together closer.” Another couple added:

Male: On a mission, it’s really 24/7 because you’re planning together, getting up in the morning and coordinating and getting off to class.

Female: You just learn—although you know the person, it’s just different being with them all the time. You have a new understanding, a new love for one another.

Service away from home changed individuals’ levels of concern for others. Several respondents felt they had become more compassionate and authentic persons as a result of their service. The wife of a Lutheran volunteer described her spouse’s changes:

His feelings were very up front when he first returned. . . that shift in understanding and compassion . . . I think it took us to a new level of authenticity and in compassion towards each other.

*Increased Connection With Those They Served.*—Participants also came to appreciate the people, cultures, and beliefs of their countries of service. One Mormon man serving in Africa described it as “after a week, not to recognize the difference in colors; you don’t make that distinction.” Another Mormon man who served in a Middle Eastern country said,

I feel like I’m much more tolerant of other people and their beliefs. I’ve come to understand that if that’s the way they want to live (then) that’s their

right. Their privilege is to worship how they want and have government the way they want. I wouldn't dictate that to them.

A third Mormon male spoke of "appreciating the differences, not being afraid of them." He noted his approval of this culture by saying, "People call it a poor country, but in so many ways it's very rich."

Some newly formed relationships were quite intimate and among the best memories of service. A Mennonite couple said,

We have three young ladies over there that call us Mom and Dad. I'm talking people in their 20s. We had a Buddhist monk request us to be his godparents. Those relationships and the way we feel about them and they feel about us, it's what we look most fondly upon at this point.

*Finding Existential Meaning in Service to Others.*—Most of the participants felt changed in one or more ways as a direct result of serving away from home. In traveling to new locations and dealing with new challenges, they had the opportunity to examine their lives, their values, and their motivations. This examination happened many times during their service and when returning home. Volunteers' perceptions of what was important in life changed. They described themselves as less materialistic, more compassionate toward others, and more authentic persons.

For many, the service itself was a life-changing experience. Respondents noted how an increased focus on serving others brought new meaning to their lives, with comments like, "You will never find significance until what you do contributes to the welfare of another person. If I'm working for myself, there's not a lot of joy in that, but when I'm helping others there's a lot of joy," or "Your life will never be the same. You will not look at life the same again." Some of the changes reflected an alteration of self-focus. In several cases, participants felt their preferred lifestyle was to serve others rather than focus on oneself. This finding was exemplified by a Mormon woman who served in South America. She said:

It makes me realize that I can't be content living, just living here in Utah and going about a life, a normal . . . I need to get back out on a mission is what I really feel like I need to be doing.

Another change was the increased awareness of global issues and human suffering, along with the

experience of living simply in their service environment, whether domestic or overseas. Several volunteers were quite affected by the losses of life and the destruction they encountered in their service settings. One man serving victims of Hurricane Katrina described his reaction as, "I'm a little less materialistic. Seeing people literally obliterated. It affects you in ways that you can't image."

Six participants identified spiritual growth resulting from their service. One Lutheran man said "it brought me closer and closer to Christ every day." A Mormon woman who served in the Pacific Islands observed the piousness of her fellow church members there and related that, "spiritually, we realized that we need to put a little more priority on the spiritual part." A Mennonite female noted that "spiritually, the exposure to other cultures and beliefs of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christians in another culture . . . helped my faith in humanity."

Several volunteers spoke of gaining a greater understanding of their lives, their abilities and a greater acceptance of themselves. A Lutheran volunteer said:

You get satisfaction in volunteering later in life, not (of) the ego type. An event like that [disaster] pushes you to understanding who you are and what you are, and being comfortable with that. There are things that I can't do and I am comfortable with that, thanks be to God.

### *Summary of Findings*

Participants identified many challenges that they experienced while providing disaster relief or other humanitarian service. Most challenges related to adjustment: to new situations, different cultural lifestyles, service-related difficulties, and returning home. Participants met these challenges with flexible attitudes, social support, patience, and trust in God. Change, growth, and benefit occurred in several ways. Prominent among benefits were increased connection with other volunteers, with spouses, and with those they served. Many participants found existential meaning in service to others, gaining compassion, authenticity, and a strengthened focus on others' welfare. Some reported shedding materialistic values they held before service, and others reported a deepened faith in God or humankind.

### **Discussion**

This qualitative study of intensive volunteering provided many examples of participants' abilities



to grow from adversity. For example, the daily challenge of adjusting to new different cultures grew into an appreciation of those cultures. Such experiences contributed to the psychosocial development of these volunteers. E. H. Erikson and Erikson (1997) saw conflicts and tensions as potential sources of growth, strength and commitment, giving individuals more abilities to work through developmental crises, and over time, facilitating the development of wisdom (E. H. Erikson et al., 1986).

Several themes from our data suggested the possibility of expanding Erikson's description of generativity and ego integrity. When Erikson developed the last two stages of his psychosocial theory, life expectancy in the United States was 10 years shorter than it is today. Because many members of the Baby Boom and earlier generations married early and had children quickly, they now had ten additional years to spend in Erikson's final two developmental stages. Many of today's seniors have good health and the opportunity to serve away from home. The differing ways in which they use this time to serve others and the growth that they obtain from this service can expand the understanding of the ways in which they carry out Erikson's last two stages.

### *Themes Related to Generativity and Ego Integrity*

An important theme emerging from the data was that of increased connection with others. This connection was not only with other volunteers but also with spouses and those served. These connections were powerful, giving support and encouragement, along with feelings of intimacy and personal satisfaction. Moreover, most respondents reported that some of the relationships continued to the present.

Both generativity and ego integrity involve interpersonal interaction. Generativity involves interacting with others to care for them, whereas ego integrity involves interactions with others to gain meaning and understanding of one's life. The interpersonal contact that the respondents experienced reflected both of these stages, with respondents not only giving help and support to others (generativity/caring) but also developing a new depth of understanding and acceptance of others (ego integrity/wisdom). Having strong interpersonal connections can hold off despair, which E. H. Erikson and Erikson (1997) posited as a continuing form of stagnation. In addition, strong engagement in social networks has positive mental

health benefits for older adults (Glass, Mendes de Leon, Bassuk, & Berkman, 2006). Thus, one way in which the mental health of senior volunteers may be maintained or improved is in the development of new relationships during their service experiences.

Problem solving skills were prevalent among our respondents. When faced with challenges, these volunteers were able to search their past experiences for similar situations (wisdom), then use those experiences, with existing resources, to address the problem (generativity). This skill was exemplified by the Lutheran volunteer who worked with others to get gift cards for building supplies when organizational monies were lacking. Creative use of existing resources, guided by wisdom from past experience, was a common occurrence in our sample.

### *Themes Related to Ego Integrity and Wisdom*

Although most of our participants had not reached late old age, their accounts suggested that they had acquired attributes through their service that they could adapt to maintain ego integrity in later life. Three themes related to ego integrity emerged in this research: (a) finding existential meaning, (b) understanding the complexity of the world, and (c) emotional resiliency.

The creation of meaning in life involves reflection, reprocessing, and synthesizing of issues from all stages of life to create a view of life that is consistent and satisfying (E. H. Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Hall, 2007). Understanding the complexity of the world includes the capacity to interact socially with empathy and understanding, to accept differences, and to know oneself well enough to successfully balance the demands of society against one's own needs and desires (E. Erikson, 1963). Emotional resiliencies enable individuals to mentally step outside difficult situations and reflect, using their base of knowledge and experience, and then respond with knowledge of the best course to take (E. H. Erikson et al., 1986; Hall, 2007). It also allows individuals to "disattend" negative information while keeping their focus on meaningful images and goals (Hall, 2007, E. H. Erikson et al., 1986).

*Creating Existential Meaning.*—Our participants exhibited ego integrity in their sense of wholeness in a life of service. The different settings in which they labored facilitated the examination

of their values, their ways of life, and their beliefs. They were able to see themselves in a new light and synthesize this information into reconfigured sets of meanings. As a result of their service, many felt that they were less materialistic. They also gained a new appreciation for the value of service and for some, a new sense of spirituality.

*Understanding Complexity.*—Some volunteers described an increased ability to remain open to new ideas and experiences, along with an increased appreciation of those from other cultural and religious backgrounds. These findings support those of Cross (1998) and A. H. Wilson's (1986) Peace Corp volunteers, who also reported increased adaptive abilities, more empathy for those in other countries, and personal growth from the challenges they faced.

*Emotional Resiliency.*—Being flexible in their responses to adverse conditions may reflect, in part, a developing wisdom that comes with solving many life course challenges. Several persons were able to reframe quite distressing events or conditions into a mindset of "it's just the way life goes." As such, they exhibited resilience in the face of adversity.

To some extent, the division of challenges, coping strategies, and benefits of service into distinct stage-related categories is beneficial. However, it is also somewhat artificial. In many ways, the challenges and benefits the volunteers experienced were intermingled in terms of the stages involved, with generative behaviors creating not only generative benefits (e.g., caring) but also ego integrity-related benefits (e.g., increased wisdom) There were many examples of this. As respondents used experiences and abilities accumulated over a lifetime to figure out how to do things (wisdom), they shared their knowledge with others (generativity). This service led in turn to stronger connections with others (generativity and ego integrity) and increased feelings of meaning in life (ego integrity). Therefore, gains in one area often led to gains in another area.

### *Limitations of the Study*

Although generalizability to a broad population is not the purpose of qualitative research, we recognize that a limited sample size with a plurality of highly educated and religious participants limits

somewhat the applicability of these findings to other older volunteer samples. In addition, participating agencies referred persons who had dealt with their service challenges successfully. We realize that not all older persons who leave home for service feel as positively about their experiences as did our participants. Despite these limitations, we identified a group of senior volunteers who will be increasingly sought by religious and secular organizations for service away from home. Their accounts provided strong evidence that persons aged more than 50 years have a great deal to contribute to these challenging endeavors. Through a combination of commitment and creative problem solving, our participants found ways to persist, adjust to their limitations, and be effective in their assignments. They defied the conventional age-related narrative of decline (Gullette, 1997) by being flexible in their thinking and acquiring new skills.

### *Implications for Practice*

Both religious and secular service organizations that provide intensive service can use the findings of this study for recruitment and retention purposes. Many nearly or newly retired baby boomers seek challenging service opportunities that enhance their development, and our study findings indicate that working with people intensely can lead to beneficial growth and change in values, behavior, and spirituality. Intensive volunteer training and field support services can be enhanced by the knowledge of challenges and strategies used by our participants to address them, so that increased numbers of future volunteers will be retained.

### **Conclusions**

Erikson decried the relegation of older people to "the onlooker bleachers of our society," feeling that in doing so, society classified them as unproductive and inadequate. He advocated finding ways that elders could still contribute to society in a manner that is within their capabilities (E. H. Erikson et al., 1986). As our respondents have shown, intensive humanitarian service given in later life offers unique opportunities for contributing to the welfare of others as well as to continue one's personal growth and development.

### **Funding**

Penn State University.

## Acknowledgments

We thank the Associate Dean of Faculty, Commonwealth Campuses, Penn State University for her generous funding of this study.

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