Social Participation In Later Life: A Co-Occurring Perspective.

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Social participation among older adults has received growing attention among researchers, policymakers, and associations. A first reason is the increased longevity and the super-sized baby boomer cohorts approaching and now entering later life (Roberts, 2010). Second, the benefits to older adults’ health and well-being by engaging in civic activities (Agahi, 2008; Cohen, 2006; Hung & Crompton, 2006). A third reason refers to the advantages for communities and society such as skills and knowledge that older individuals have accumulated (Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Heritage & Dooris, 2009).

However, within research on civic engagement in later life several insights remain under-researched. One of the first major shortcomings of previous research on social participation among older adults is the tendency to assess a conceptual framework that does not go beyond the traditional theories on later life. To date research has been undervaluing the potential of older adults within civil society (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007).

A second gap in research is a lack of knowledge in the multiplicity of civic activities that older adults undertake within research. In order to understand involvement in later life insights into the extent to which activities compete or complement with each other is necessary as well as clustering the activities rather than examining them separately (Morrow-Howell, 2010). Only a limited number of scholars within sociological and gerontological studies gained, by means of different methods, insight into the variety of social activities individuals undertake in later life.

Moreover, few social scientists to date conducted studies incorporating simultaneous consideration of multiple activities (Burr, Mutchler & Caro, 2007; Sugihara, Sugisawa, Shibata & Harada, 2008). Likewise, most research on co-occurring productive activities have been ignoring an array of activities beneficial for older adults as for society, such as leisure or social activities (Morrow-Howell, 2010).

Data for the present research were derived from the Belgian Aging Studies (N=67144). This survey assessed quality of life and living conditions of home-dwelling people aged 60 and over (e.g., volunteering, cultural and political participation, membership in associations, care giving, well-being). The BAS survey data were collected through a participatory methodology, peer-research, which is a method that embraces older people not only as the research group, but also as an essential partner of the project. In each municipality, between 30 and 80 older volunteers were recruited who facilitated and monitored the research process. The main objective is to disentangle nine aspects of social participation, including participation in associations, in elderly associations, formal volunteering, informal volunteering (adult and child care), lifelong learning (following courses), cultural, leisure, and political participation and analyzing whether they contest or match each other. Factor Analyses indicate a strong positive correlation between the types of participation establishing that being
active in one domain increased the propensity to be engaged in another domain. The paper concludes by discussing new methodological approaches and how people balance volunteering, caregiving, social roles, and so forth, and with what outcomes.

References


