

# Unpacking the relation between extraversion and volunteering in later life: The role of social capital

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## Abstract

This study tested the hypothesis that the relation between extraversion and volunteering by older adults is fully mediated by social capital (participation in clubs and organizations, church attendance, and contact with friends). Data for this study come from 888 adults between the ages of 65–90 years old who participated in the Later Life Study of Social Exchanges (LLSSE). In support of our hypothesis, structural equation modeling revealed that extraversion exerted: (a) a significant total effect on volunteering (0.122), (b) significant indirect effects on volunteering via contact with friends (0.042), church attendance (0.034), and clubs and organizations (females only: 0.042), and (c) a non-significant direct effect on volunteering (0.010). These findings suggest that social capital provides a viable explanation for the association between extraversion and volunteering.

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## 1. Introduction

Older adults constitute an immense reservoir of human capital, and volunteering represents one of the venues for them to contribute productively to society (Butler, 2002). The demand for

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volunteers among future generations of older adults is forecasted to increase (Soo & Gong-Soog, 1998). In light of this projection, it is important to understand the dynamics of volunteering by older adults. One factor that has received scant attention from researchers is the influence of extraversion on volunteering by older adults. It is possible for personality traits to exhibit both direct and indirect effects on volunteering (Carlo, Okun, Knight, & de Guzman, 2005).

Using data from the 1986 Americans' Changing Lives survey, Herzog and Morgan (1993) cast a wide net to examine the direct and indirect effects on later-life volunteering of three sets of exogenous variables—personality traits (e.g., extraversion), social-structural characteristics (e.g., education), and environmental factors (e.g., urbanicity)—and three sets of mediating variables—roles (e.g., work status), social participation (e.g., involvement with formal organizations), and health (e.g., functional health limitations). Herzog and Morgan (1993) found evidence for partial mediation of the effects of extraversion on volunteering by older adults, that is, the effect of extraversion on volunteering was reduced but remained significant. However, Herzog and Morgan (1993) did not compute and test the significance of the indirect effects. Thus, from their study, it is not possible to specify the pathways by which the effect of extraversion on volunteering was partially mediated.

In contrast, in the present study, using structural equation modeling, we focused more narrowly on Wilson's (2000) hypothesis that the effect of extraversion on volunteering by older adults is fully explained by the links between extraversion and social capital on the one hand and between social capital and volunteering on the other hand. Social capital refers to the resources that are derived from relationships with other people and organizations. Smith (1994) concluded from his review of the literature that ties to other people and organizations were important determinants of volunteering. Social resources include informal and formal social ties (Wilson, 2000). Accordingly, we conceptualized variables related to human capital (education, employment status, financial difficulties, and health limitations) and demographic variables (sex, age, and ethnicity) as exogenous variables. Because Herzog and Morgan (1993) found that marital status did not predict volunteering, we also treated it as an exogenous factor.

Furthermore, Herzog and Morgan (1993) measured participation in formal organizations by summing responses to questions regarding the frequency of participation in meetings of formal organizations and church services. Based upon the findings of Okun and Michel (2006) who demonstrated that church attendance and participation in other organizations made independent contributions to predicting volunteering by older adults, in the present study: (a) attendance at meetings of clubs and organizations and (b) church attendance were treated as separate mediating variables.

## 2. The mediational model

### 2.1. *Extraversion*

Extraversion has been identified as one of the traits that comprise the Big Five model of the structure of personality traits (John, 1990). Extraverts are very sociable people who also are energetic, optimistic, friendly, and assertive. Introverts tend to be reserved, independent, and even-paced (McCrae & Costa, 1984). Because formal volunteering often requires extensive social interactions, scholars have posited that it is associated with being extraverted (Burke & Hall,

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