**Hidden Threads: Older Adults, Volunteer Engagement, and Spirituality**

SR 968 – Sociological Methodology

Katherine Blanc

Omega Graduate School

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Professor

Dr. Joshua Reichard

***Assignment #3 – Essay*** (Instructions from the Syllabus)

Complete the Hidden Threads assignment as detailed below and explained in class.

*Requirements*

* Topic Selection and Approval:
  1. Email your topic and a rough outline to Dr. Schmidt for feedback and approval well in advance of the assignment due-date deadline. (schmidt@umassglobal.edu)
  2. Schedule a meeting with Dr. Schmidt to review feedback. (schmidt@umassglobal.edu)
  3. After receiving approval of the topic and rough outline, submit a rough draft to Dr. Schmidt in advance of the turn-in deadline (schmidt@umassglobal.edu). He will provide the feedback necessary for preparing the final paper.
* The Essay – This paper should be approximately 5-7 double-spaced pages in length and may be longer. Provide an appropriate (and interesting) title for your essay. Write a short paragraph introducing the reader to the topic you will explore in your paper (i.e., This paper explores both theological and sociological dimensions of the obesity epidemic in the United States...). Then, follow the steps listed below: (Develop each in paragraph form, and clearly explicate all concepts you will develop.) Follow this pattern and organize your work under headings, or using the numbers for the parts of the assignment listed below:
  1. a. Identify a few concepts to be used for the interpretation of the problem you have chosen. (i.e., for a topic dealing with obesity, you might choose “hunger” or “emptiness.”) Define/explicate this concept(s), explaining how it will be employed in your analysis.
  2. b. Identify sub-concepts that are related to the concepts you have chosen in #1. (i.e., for obesity sub-concepts might include, “gratification,” “satisfaction,” etc.) Define/explicate these sub-concepts, explaining how they offer additional analysis of your chosen problem. This extends your analysis beyond #1, offering additional depth and nuance.
  3. c. Identify several biblical passages or concepts that provide meaning for these concepts and sub-concepts? (Perhaps something that addressed “food and drink that satisfy” ... or other passages that deal with such matters as being “filled with the spirit, “gluttony,” “fasting,” “feasting,” etc.) Drawing on these passages, and related theological ideas, explain their connection to the

d. concepts/sub-concepts you have employed in your analysis of the problem. Note: this is not simply attaching Bible verses that “inspire” or “shed light on...” Rather, the emphasis should center on the conceptual and analytical. (I’m not as interested in “normative” [Christians must... Christians should...] approaches.)

* e. Identify secular (i.e., sociological) studies that utilize or address these concepts and sub-concepts. (*Supersize Me* [a movie], *The McDonaldization of Society* by George Ritzer, Studies on anorexia or bulimia, etc.) Use these to develop your analysis sociologically. You can think of this as a very short “literature review.”
* f. Explain how your analysis aids /offers insight into contemporary life/society. (i.e., the burgeoning fast-food industry, Western society’s focus on efficiency and calculability, etc.) Where is your chosen problem “visible” in contemporary society... what contemporary illustrations can you identify and briefly interpret using some of the analysis developed in #1- #4)?
* g. How does your analysis make a contribution to Christian thinking on the topic/problem? (For example, understanding the relationship between appetite, indulgence, and a life of the Spirit, and then extending these ideas to areas other than just obesity and food.) What fresh new idea(s) can you offer to fellow Christians?
* h. How does your analysis make a contribution to sociological thinking about this issue? Can you offer a new sociological insight or two derived from your analysis?

**Outline**

I. Conceptual Framework for Volunteerism as Ministry

a. Primary Concepts

Purpose: Definition and application in senior volunteerism.

Connection: Exploration of its role in volunteerism for enhancing community ties.

Wisdom Sharing: The impact of elders' experiences in enriching volunteer work.

b. Related Sub-concepts

Empowerment: How volunteerism fosters a sense of capability among seniors.

Intergenerational Solidarity: The mutual benefits of interaction between seniors and other age groups within volunteer settings.

II. Theological Dimensions of Volunteerism

c. Biblical Foundations

Examination of scriptures that discuss service, community, and the sharing of wisdom.

d. Theological Analysis

Linking the concepts of purpose, connection, and wisdom sharing with biblical principles, interpreting them beyond inspirational verses towards a more analytical framework.

III. Sociological Analysis

e. Literature Review

A review of secular studies on volunteerism, focusing on senior participation in community service.

f. Societal Implications

Identifying trends and patterns in contemporary society where senior volunteerism is manifested, and interpreting these observations through the established conceptual framework.

IV. Contributions to Christian and Sociological Thought

g. Christian Insights

Discussing the implications of this analysis for Christian thought, particularly in understanding volunteerism as a form of ministry and service.

h. Sociological Contributions

Presenting new insights into the sociological understanding of elder volunteerism, drawing from the research and analysis presented.

Conclusion:

The paper will synthesize the insights gained from both theological and sociological analyses, arguing that senior volunteerism, when viewed as a form of *personal ministry*, not only contributes to the public health sector but also offers a valuable model for integrating spirituality into secular community service. This exploration contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of seniors in society, the application of Christian ethics in public service, and the sociological impacts of such engagements.

**Introduction**

In their seminal book *Hidden Threads* (2010), Russell Heddendorf and Matthew Vos observed that, “The study of social thought shows how scriptural principles are frequently in agreement with social principles” (p. 3). It can therefore be argued that volunteerism and spirituality––sharing relational threads––can greatly enhance the development and enrichment of communities when they are merged.  
 The purpose of this essay is to examine the role of senior volunteers in public health, arguing that their involvement transcends mere participation; it constitutes a form of personal ministry that has profound benefits for both those serving and the entire community. I will explore contributions of elders to an all-volunteer Hospital Foundation, illustrating how their service strengthens community bonds, fosters mutual understanding, and exemplifies the spirit of volunteerism in action. In this discourse, senior volunteerism is viewed not only as a beneficial social activity but also as a spiritually enriching practice that reinforces the foundations of a vibrant society. By integrating theological and sociological perspectives, this paper explores how the integration of spiritual components into secular volunteerism enhances the sense of purpose among seniors and enhances community ties.

**Theological Dimensions of Volunteerism  
Biblical Foundations**  
***Service:*** The concept of service can be examined through Mark 10:45 (NIV), where Jesus' mission is described as serving rather than being served, suggesting an active and giving model of leadership and engagement.  
***Community:*** Acts 2:44-47 (NIV) provides a vivid depiction of early Christian community life, emphasizing sharing, unity, and collective wellbeing. This passage can inform our understanding of how senior volunteers contribute to the community through their service.  
***Wisdom Sharing***: In Proverbs 9:9 (NIV) we are told, "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning." This speaks to the value of imparting wisdom, which senior volunteers can do through interactions with others. **Theological Analysis  
*Purpose and Service:*** Ephesians 2:10 (NIV) describes believers as God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." This passage suggests that service engagement is part of one's divine purpose. ***Connection and Community:*** Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV) suggests, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together..." This underpins the value of fostering connections and community and can be seen as a biblical mandate for the communal aspect of volunteerism. ***Wisdom Sharing:*** Job 12:12 (NIV) affirms a relationship between age and wisdom ("Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?"). This passage theologically emphasizes the role of senior volunteers in sharing their wisdom through service.

**Conceptual Framework for Volunteerism as Ministry**Abell (2019) asserts that, “Throughout the history of the church, ministry to the members has played an important role. Early Christians ministered to those who were sick to demonstrate God’s love” (p.2).Abell’s statament helped me frame healthcare as a form of *ministry*. When viewed in this light, I can see how the motives for ministering to the sick might carry a higher purpose and calling than simply tending to the sick out of guilt or pity. Although specific religious references are prohibited in my professional interactions, I am comforted that the roots of today’s society and laws are rooted in sacred texts from Judeo-Christian history.As a volunteer director of a Hospital Foundation I embrace this sense of calling; this will also help me maintain focus and handle challenges, reminding me that I am serving a higher power, and changing the world in ways that I am able.   
 As an example of specifically Christian community healthcare support, Abell explains that “the Daughters of Charity have been known for caring for individuals since 1633” (p. 2).Christianity’s ability to change the social structure, and thus the world, was magnified through healing the sick. While I was already aware of hospitals operated by religious organizations such as Catholic orders and Seventh Day Adventists, I was unaware that Christians originated the concept of hospital-as-institution. The hospital that I voluntarily serve offers “charity care” to community members who are uninsured and cannot afford out-of-pocket medical care.The Daughters of Charity are a reminder of hospital charity care’s Christian roots. I am personally proud to be carrying on a centuries-long history that is rooted in Christian principles.  
 Abell further states that “The challenges and barriers to health access in rural areas are unique. Faith community nurses (FCNs) are positioned to cover many of the gaps” (p. 2).I perceive faith community nurses as change agents in rural healthcare settings, such as the one that I serve in the small rural mountain community.Although residents of this community are largely churchgoing, the Healthcare District is a public agency and is therefore governed by secular laws and ethics.  
 Until I read Abell’s work, I was unaware of the existence of “faith community nurses” (FCNs). This new awareness has led me to discover an organization devoted entirely to FCN: the Faith Community Nursing Network. Based upon what I read in this source, I intend to reach out to local faith-based organizations in our area to see whether their organizations already work in some capacity with FCNs, or are aware of FCN networks.   
 “With nearly one-quarter of the U.S. population living in rural areas, access to healthcare is challenging. Smaller, rural hospitals are closing; rural Americans must drive much farther to the nearest acute care facility ” (p. 1). A faith community can create social reform at the local level, which can fan out into the world.  
 Our local hospital faced closure seven years ago. Fortunately our Healthcare District––Bear Valley Community Healthcare District––received federal and state designation as a Critical Access Hospital (CAH). The CAH designation denotes rural hospitals that serve populations who might otherwise have difficulty reaching a hospital. This designation also provides for federal funding specifically allocated to CAHs.  
 A CAH must be 35 miles away, at minimum, from another hospital or CAH to qualify for the status. Bear Valley Community Hospital is one of 1,300 CAHs in the United States.   
 I can see how the integration of faith has traditionally created a framework for social reform in healthcare––even in small personal ways. The hospital with which I volunteer sits in a small rural town that has a large faith community. Since the hospital is not operated by a religious facility (such as Catholic or Adventist hospitals), it cannot overtly promote religious values. However, hospital volunteers such as myself have brought our spiritual values into the work we do. In this way, we are helping to create social reform on an individual basis.  
 Abell reminds the reader that “Faith community nurses (FCNs) can assist rural patients to afford care by helping them identify health concerns early and avoid urgent or more intensive care after problems become severe” (p. 1).  
 As I’ve been learning in this program, Christianity was integral to humanity’s understanding of caring for the sick. Abell demonstrates how faith community nurses (FCN) bring their spiritual compassion into the rural community setting, influencing social change by example.  
 I intend to search for local faith-based nursing resources such as FCNs) in our area. However, this may prove challenging due to the small population of Big Bear Valley (6,000 full time residents). Nonetheless, I plan to inquire amongst the various churches to see if they are aware of faith-based nursing services/networks in the local region.  
 In ACTS 20:35 it is stated that, “In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35). The concept of helping the weak––I cannot think of anyone who is better represented by this phrase than Jesus.  
 Is it more blessed to give than receive? Although I’m unsure precisely what Jesus meant by “blessed” in this specific context, I personally *feel* better when I give than when I receive. And I know that I am creating constructive social change.  
 The work I do with our Hospital Foundation is 100% voluntary. Our organization has no paid staff; we give of our time and money because it feels good to make a difference for our community. It warms the heart to know that we are helping the weaker among us––the sick and injured, many of whom cannot afford to pay for healthcare. We Foundation volunteers have aligned ourselves with something Higher than ourselves; we are aligned with Spirit and changing society in a constructive way.  
 Charles (2021) asserts that, **“**Religion plays a significant role in the lives of people all over the world and religious practices of some sort are evident in every society. That makes religion a cultural universal along with other general practices found in every culture” (p. 38). While I realize that OGS emphasizes Christian religious principles, I agree with Charles that religion truly is a *cultural universal*. Since religion is evident in every society, I recognize religion’s power to influence social reform. The variant aspect pertains to my uncertainty about what constitutes a “revival” of spiritual awakening.  
 Although our Hospital makes no religious pronouncements, nor is it guided or influenced by spiritual doctrine, the community of Big Bear Lake has religious facilities representing Christian churches (denominational and non-denominational) as well as those of non-Christian faiths and creeds. Threads of the secular and spiritual do intertwine; I currently interact with several Foundation members who view their volunteer Foundation work as a form of ministry.

**Sociological Analysis Specific to Senior Volunteerism  
Literature Review**  
In reviewing secular studies on volunteerism, it is essential to consider the growing body of research that examines the motivations, impacts, and benefits of senior participation in community service. Studies such as those by Tang, Choi, and Morrow-Howell (2010) often highlight the positive correlation between volunteerism and mental and physical health in seniors. Moreover, research by Greenfield and Marks (2004) suggests that volunteer work can provide seniors with psychological benefits that stem from a sense of purpose and social integration. These studies provide a foundational understanding of volunteerism's benefits to seniors and the community at large.  
**Societal Implications**  
There is a growing trend toward senior engagement in volunteer roles, particularly in public health, education, and social services sectors. This trend can be partly attributed to the aging population seeking active post-retirement life and the recognition of the skills and experiences seniors bring to volunteerism.  
 By examining the presence of senior volunteers in organizations such as our Hospital Foundation, we can observe patterns such as the desire to promote the wellbeing of younger generations through Erikson’s (1963) concept of *generativity*––the pursuit of activities that provide a legacy and lasting impact on society. This aligns with the concept of "purpose" previously discussed.  
 Furthermore, the current societal context often showcases senior volunteerism in initiatives such as mentorship programs, where the "wisdom sharing" aspect is prominent, fulfilling both a community need and providing seniors with meaningful engagement.  
 Through the established conceptual framework, these patterns can be interpreted to understand the broader implications of senior volunteerism. For example, the societal shift towards valuing lifelong learning and active aging can be seen in the growing number of programs designed to integrate senior volunteers into community-based roles, highlighting an increased recognition of the mutual benefits of such engagement.

This section of the essay would use secular research to analyze how senior volunteerism is not only visible but vital in contemporary society, offering insights into how these patterns can be understood through sociological theories and concepts, and providing a comprehensive picture of the role seniors play in the fabric of modern social structures.  
**Contributions to Christian and Sociological Thought  
*Christian Insights***  
The implications of this analysis for Christian thought, particularly in understanding volunteerism as a form of ministry and service.  
***Sociological Contributions***  
Presenting new insights into the sociological understanding of elder volunteerism, drawing from the research and analysis presented.

**Conclusion**

Volunteerism––particularly senior volunteerism, when viewed as a personal ministry, not only contributes to the public health sector but also offers a valuable model for integrating spirituality into secular community service. This exploration contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of seniors in society, the application of Christian ethics in public service, and the sociological impacts of such engagements.



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